

THE BEST OF **Omni** SCIENCE FICTION NO.5



COLLECTOR'S EDITION

19 STORIES—5 NEVER-BEFORE-PUBLISHED.
FEATURING PHILIP K. DICK, ROBERT SILVERBERG,
HARLAN ELLISON, DAMON KNIGHT,
AND GREGORY BENFORD. EDITED BY DON MYRUS



THE BEST OF **OMNI** SCIENCE FICTION NO.5

This colorfully illustrated volume—a book in magazine format—includes reprints from *Omni* magazine, reprints of SF classics, and never-before-published stories. In these pages, there is plenty of riveting suspense, occasional straight humor, some satire, and much food for thought. Included in the latter are timely speculations about the environment and about the conse-

quences of a big war. Science fiction may not be everything to everybody, but this volume stands witness to the fact that if you like a good yarn told in lively style and if you are generally curious and concerned, you can be certain that you have spent your money wisely and well. Its predecessors, the four earlier volumes in this series, were bought by about one million people.

EDITED BY DON MYRUS



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OMNI ENCORE PART ONE

Rautavaara's Case" by Philip K.

Dick is a startling and provocative metaphor concerning religion—in this "case" the ironic contrast between Christianity and the theology of a non-human species from a faraway planet. Glowing with vivid imagery, the story involves an extraordinarily unorthodox conflict over the doctrine of the Eucharist. The message in Dick's brilliant construction is that one's faith may be another's anathema.

Yiddish humor, such as that to be enjoyed in Sherwood Springer's "Only You Fanzzy," is encountered from time to time in science-fiction literature. Avram Davidson has worked the vein—"The Golem," for example—as has William Tenn, who with hilarious effect gave us the memorable, "On Venus Have We Got a Rabbi." Springer's short-short concerns a madam and a Mr. Lefkoviz. He performs a *mitzvah* (good deed) on her behalf—but a *mitzvah*, maybe exactly it isn't.

James Randi's "Lesson One" involves a venerable stage illusionist and his prodigiously gifted young protege. That Randi chose to write about such a pair will not surprise those readers who are aware of his colorful career as a magician and escape artist. But since he has also gained great notice as a dedicated debunker of ESP and other so-called paranormal performances, the denouement of his story is sure to raise some eyebrows.

"The Hunting of Hewlish" by Sam Nicholson delineates the beguiling aspects of a highly evolved civilization on future Earth. It's a love story, although one quite different from the emotion-wrought romances all too familiar since the Age of Chivalry. Nicholson's vision takes place in a cool, super-sophisticated and somewhat complacent high-tech society.

In "New is Beautiful," Tony Holkham presents a postwar world completely different from that usually imagined. Instead of the stereotypical retrogression to a primitive status, mankind emerges as a race of Einsteinian wunderkinder who are smart enough to know that even the brightest of students can be enriched by a wise, experienced tutor.



*The aliens saved the woman's life only
to find themselves defending
their action before a board of inquiry*

RAUTAVAARA'S CASE

BY PHILIP K. DICK

The three technicians of the floating globe monitored fluctuations in interstellar magnetic fields, and they did a good job until the moment they died.

Basalt fragments, traveling at enormous velocity in relation to their globe, ruptured their barrier and abolished their air supply. The two males were slow to react and did nothing. The young female technician from Finland, Agneta Rautavaara, managed to get her emergency helmet on, but the hoses tangled; she aspirated and died: a melancholy death, strangling on her own vomit. Herewith ended the survey task of EX208, their floating globe. In another month the technicians would have been relieved and returned to Earth.

We could not get there in time to save the three Earthpersons, but we did dispatch a robot to see whether any of them could be regenerated. Earthpersons do not like us, but in this case their survey globe was operating in our vicinity. There are rules governing such emergencies that are binding on all races in the galaxy. We had no desire to help Earthpersons, but we obey the rules.

The rules called for an attempt on our part to restore life to the three dead technicians, but we allowed a robot to take on the responsibility, and perhaps there we erred. Also, the rules required us to notify the closest Earth ship of the calamity, and we chose not to. I will not defend this omis-

sion or analyze our reasoning at the time.

The robot signaled that it had found no brain function in the two males and that their neural tissue had degenerated. Regarding Agneta Rautavaara, a slight brain wave could be detected. So in Rautavaara's case the robot would begin a restoration attempt. Since it could not make a judgment decision on its own, however, it contacted us. We told it to make the attempt. The fault—the guilt, so to speak—therefore lies with us. Had we been on the scene, we would have known better. We accept the blame.

An hour later the robot signaled that it had restored significant brain function in Rautavaara by supplying her brain with

PHOTOGRAPH BY HUBERT KRETZSCHMAR

oxygen-rich blood from her dead body. The oxygen, but not the nutriments, came from the robot. We instructed it to begin synthesis of nutriments by processing Rautavaara's body, using it as raw material. This is the point at which the Earth authorities later made their most profound objection. But we did not have any other source of nutriments. Since we ourselves are a plasma, we could not offer our own bodies for the purpose.

They objected that we could have used the bodies of Rautavaara's dead companions. But we felt that, based on the robot's reports, the other bodies were too contaminated by radioactivity and hence were toxic to Rautavaara; nutriments derived from those sources would soon poison her brain. If you do not accept our logic, it does not matter to us; this was the situation as we construed it from our remote point. This is why I say our real error lay in sending a robot rather than going ourselves. If you wish to indict us, indict us for that.

We asked the robot to patch into Rautavaara's brain and transmit her thoughts to us so that we could assess the physical condition of her neural cells.

The impression that we received was sanguine. It was at this point that we notified the Earth authorities. We informed them of the accident that had destroyed EX208; we informed them that two of the technicians, the males, were irretrievably dead; we informed them that through swift efforts on our part we had the one female showing stable cephalic activity—which is to say, we had her brain alive.

"Her what?" the Earthperson radio operator said, in response to our call.

"We are supplying her nutriments derived from her body—"

"Oh, Christ," the Earthperson radio operator said. "You can't feed her brain that way. What good is just a brain?"

"It can think," we said.

"All right. We'll take over now," the Earthperson radio operator said. "But there will be an inquiry."

"Was it not right to save her brain?" we asked. "After all, the psyche is located in the brain. The physical body is a device by which the brain relates to—"

"Give me the location of EX208," the Earthperson radio operator said. "We'll send a ship there at once. You should have notified us at once before trying your own rescue efforts. You Approximations simply do not understand somatic life forms."

It is offensive to us to hear the term Ap-

proximations. It is an Earth slur regarding our origin in the Proxima Centauri system. What it implies is that we are not authentic, that we merely simulate life.

This was our reward in the Rautavaara case. To be derided. And indeed there was an inquiry.

Within the depths of her damaged brain Agneta Rautavaara tasted acid vomit and recoiled in fear and aversion. All around her EX208 lay in splinters. She could see Travis and Elms; they had been torn to bloody bits, and the blood had frozen. Ice covered the interior of the globe. *Air gone, temperature gone . . . What's keeping me alive?* she wondered. She put her hands up and touched her face—or rather tried to touch her face. *My helmet*, she thought. *I got it on in time.*

The ice, which covered everything, began to melt. The severed arms and legs of her two companions rejoined their bodies. Basalt fragments, embedded in the hull of the globe, withdrew and flew away.

Time, Agneta realized, *is running backward. How strange!*

Air returned; she heard the dull tone of the indicator horn. Travis and Elms, groggily, got to their feet. They stared around them, bewildered. She felt like laughing, but it was too grim for that. Apparently the force of the impact had caused a local time perturbation.

"Both of you sit down," she said.

Travis said thickly, "I—okay; you're right." He seated himself at his console and pressed the button that strapped him securely in place. Elms, however, just stood.

"We were hit by rather large particles," Agneta said.

"Yes," Elms said.

"Large enough and with enough impact to perturb time," Agneta said. "So we've gone back to before the event."

"Well, the magnetic fields are partly responsible," Travis said. He rubbed his eyes; his hands shook. "Get your helmet off, Agneta. You don't really need it."

"But the impact is coming," she said.

Both men glanced at her.

"We'll repeat the accident," she said.

"Shit," Travis said, "I'll take the EX out of here." He pushed many keys on his console. "It'll miss us."

Agneta removed her helmet. She stepped out of her boots, picked them up . . . and then saw the figure.

The figure stood behind the three of them. It was Christ.

"Look," she said to Travis and Elms.

The figure wore a traditional white robe and sandals; his hair was long and pale with what looked like moonlight. Bearded, his face was gentle and wise. *Just like in the holoads the churches back home put out*, Agneta thought. *Robed, bearded, wise and gentle, and his arms slightly raised. Even the nimbus is there. How odd that our preconceptions were so accurate!*

"Oh, my God," Travis said. Both men stared, and she stared, too. "He's come for us."

"Well, it's fine with me," Elms said.

"Sure, it would be fine with you," Travis said bitterly. "You have no wife and children. And what about Agneta? She's only three hundred years old; she's a baby."

Christ said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me, you can do nothing."

"I'm getting the EX out of this vector," Travis said.

"My little children," Christ said, "I shall not be with you much longer."

"Good," Travis said. The EX was now moving at peak velocity in the direction of the Sirius axis; their star chart showed massive flux.

"Damn you, Travis," Elms said savagely.

"This is a great opportunity. I mean, how many people have seen Christ? I mean, it is Christ. You are Christ, aren't you?" he asked the figure.

Christ said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you know my Father, too. From this moment you know him and have seen him."

"There," Elms said, his face showing happiness. "See? I want it known that I am very glad of this occasion, Mr.—" He broke off. "I was going to say, 'Mr. Christ.' That's stupid; that is really stupid. Christ, Mr. Christ, will you sit down? You can sit at my console or at Ms. Rautavaara's. Isn't that right, Agneta? This here is Walter Travis; he's not a Christian, but I am; I've been a Christian all my life. Well, most of my life. I'm not sure about Ms. Rautavaara. What do you say, Agneta?"

"Stop babbling, Elms," Travis said.

Elms said, "He's going to judge us."

Christ said, "If anyone hears my words and does not keep them faithfully, it is not I who shall condemn him, since I have come not to condemn the world but to save the world; he who rejects me and refuses my words has his judge already."

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"There," Elms said, nodding gravely.

Frightened, Agneta said to the figure, "Go easy on us. The three of us have been through a major trauma." She wondered, suddenly, whether Travis and Elms remembered that they had been killed, that their bodies had been destroyed.

The figure smiled, as if to reassure her.

"Travis," Agneta said, bending down over him as he sat at his console. "I want you to listen to me. Neither you nor Elms survived the accident, survived the basalt particles. That's why he's here. I'm the only one who wasn't—" She hesitated.

"Killed," Elms said. "We're dead, and he has come for us." To the figure he said, "I'm ready, Lord. Take me."

"Take both of them," Travis said. "I'm sending out a radio H.E.L.P. call. And I'm telling them what's taking place here. I'm going to report it before he takes me or tries to take me."

"You're dead," Elms told him.

"I can still file a radio report," Travis said, but his face showed his resignation.

To the figure, Agneta said, "Give Travis a little time. He doesn't fully understand. But I guess you know that; you know everything."

The figure nodded.

We and the Earth Board of Inquiry listened to and watched this activity in Rautavaara's brain, and we realized jointly what had happened. But we did not agree on our evaluation of it. Whereas the six Earthpersons saw it as pernicious, we saw it as grand—both for Agneta Rautavaara and for us. By means of her damaged brain, restored by an ill-advised robot, we were in touch with the next world and the powers that ruled it.

The Earthpersons' view distressed us.

"She's hallucinating," the spokesperson of the Earthpeople said. "Since she has no sensory data coming in. Since her body is dead. Look what you've done to her."

We made the point that Agneta Rautavaara was happy.

"What we must do," the human spokesperson said, "is shut down her brain."

"And cut us off from the next world?" we objected. "This is a splendid opportunity to view the afterlife. Agneta Rautavaara's brain is our lens. The scientific merit outweighs the humanitarian."

This was the position we took at the inquiry. It was a position of sincerity, not of expedience.

The Earthpersons decided to keep Rau-

tavaara's brain at full function with both video and audio transduction, which of course was recorded; meanwhile, the matter of censuring us was put in suspension.

I personally found myself fascinated by the Earth idea of the Savior. It was, for us, an antique and quaint conception—not because it was anthropomorphic but because it involved a schoolroom adjudication of the departed soul. Some kind of tote board was involved, listing good and bad acts: a transcendent report card such as one finds employed in the teaching and grading of elementary-school children.

This, to us, was a primitive conception of the Savior, and while I watched and listened—while we watched and listened as a polyencephalic entity—I wondered what Agneta Rautavaara's reaction would have been to a Savior, a Guide of the Soul, based on our expectations.

Her brain, after all, was maintained by our equipment, by the original mechanism that our rescue robot had brought to the scene of the accident. It would have been too risky to disconnect it; too much brain damage had occurred already. The total apparatus, involving her brain, had been transferred to the site of the judicial inquiry, a neutral ark located between the Proxima

Centauri system and the Sol system.

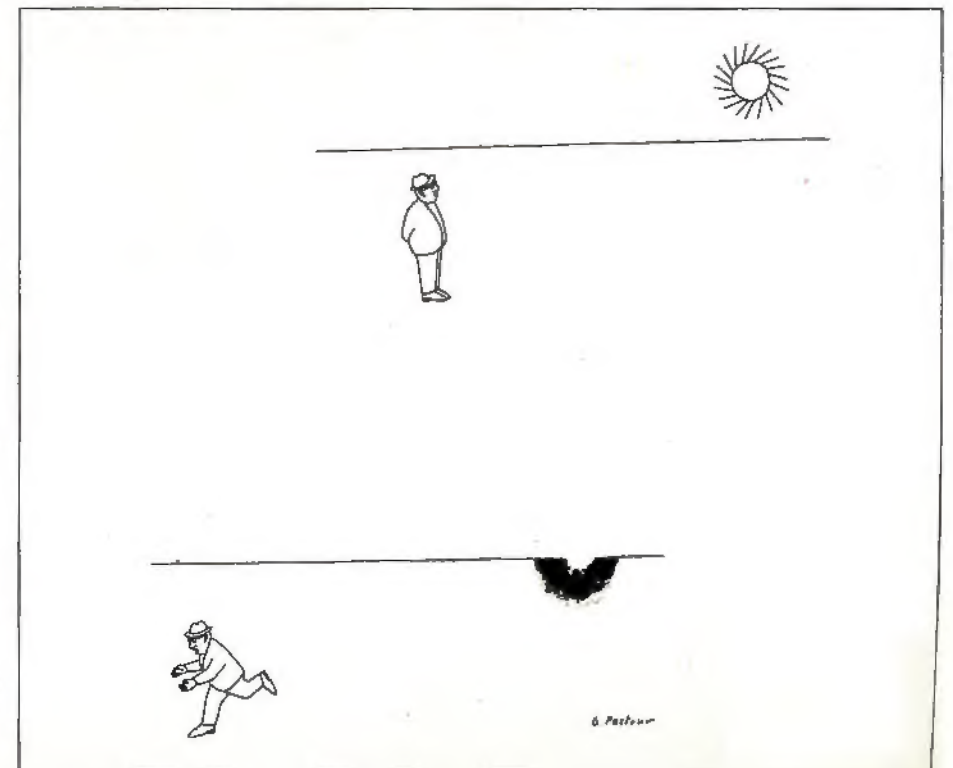
Later, in discreet discussion with my companions, I suggested that we attempt to infuse our own conception of the Afterlife Guide of the Soul into Rautavaara's artificially sustained brain. My point: It would be interesting to see how she reacted.

At once my companions pointed out to me the contradiction in my logic. I had argued at the inquiry that Rautavaara's brain was a window on the next world and, hence, justified—which exculpated us. Now I argued that what she experienced was a projection of her own mental presuppositions, nothing more.

"Both propositions are true," I said. "It is a genuine window on the next world, and it is a presentation of Rautavaara's own cultural, racial propensities."

What we had, in essence, was a model into which we could introduce carefully selected variables. We could introduce into Rautavaara's brain our own conception of the Guide of the Soul and thereby see how our rendition differed practically from the puerile one of the Earthpersons.

This was a novel opportunity to test out our own theology. In our opinion the Earthpersons' theology had been tested sufficiently and had been found wanting.



We decided to perform the act, since we maintained the gear supporting Rautavaara's brain. To us, this was a much more interesting issue than the outcome of the inquiry. Blame is a mere cultural matter; it does not travel at all well across species boundaries.

I suppose the Earthpersons could regard our intentions as malign. I deny that; we deny that. Call it, instead, a game. It would provide us aesthetic enjoyment to witness Rautavaara confronted by our Savior, rather than hers.

To Travis, Elms, and Agneta, the figure, raising its arms, said, "I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies, he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"I sure do," Elms said heartily.

Travis said, "It's bilge."

To herself, Agneta Rautavaara thought, *I'm not sure. I just don't know.*

"We have to decide if we're going to go with him," Elms said. "Travis, you're done for; you're out. Sit there and rot—that's your fate." To Agneta he said, "I hope you find for Christ, Agneta. I want you to have eternal life like I'm going to have. Isn't that right, Lord?" he asked the figure.

The figure nodded.

Agneta said, "Travis, I think—well, I feel you should go along with this. I—" She did not want to press the point that Travis was dead. But he had to understand the situation; otherwise, as Elms said, he was doomed. "Go with us," she said.

"You're going, then?" Travis asked with some bitterness.

"Yes," she said.

Elms, gazing at the figure, said in a low voice, "Quite possibly I'm mistaken, but it seems to be changing."

She looked, but saw no change. Yet Elms seemed frightened.

The figure, in its white robe, walked slowly toward the seated Travis. The figure halted close by Travis, stood for a time, and then, bending, bit Travis's face.

Agneta screamed. Elms stared, and Travis, locked into his seat, thrashed. The figure calmly ate him.

"Now you see," the spokesperson for the Board of Inquiry said, "this brain must be shut down. The deterioration is severe; the experience is terrible for her; it must end."

I said, "No. We from the Proxima system find this turn of events highly interesting."

"But the Savior is eating Travis!" another of the Earthpersons exclaimed.

"In your religion," I said, "is it not the case that you eat the flesh of your God and drink his blood? All that has happened here is a mirror image of that Eucharist."

"I order her brain shut down!" the spokesperson for the board said; his face was pale; sweat stood out on his forehead.

"We should see more first," I said. I found it highly exciting, this enactment of our own sacrament, our highest sacrament, in which our Savior consumes us.

"Agneta," Elms whispered, "did you see that? Christ ate Travis. There's nothing left but his gloves and boots."

Oh, God, Agneta Rautavaara thought. *What is happening? I don't understand.*

She moved away from the figure, over to Elms. Instinctively.

"He is my blood," the figure said as it licked its lips. "I drink of this blood, the blood of eternal life. When I have drunk it, I will live forever. He is my body. I have no body of my own; I am only a plasma. By eating his body, I obtain everlasting life. This is the new truth that I proclaim, that I am eternal."

"He's going to eat us, too," Elms said.

Yes, Agneta Rautavaara thought. *He is.* She could see now that the figure was an Approximation. *It is a Proxima life form, she realized. He's right; he has no body of his own. The only way he can get a body is—*

"I'm going to kill him," Elms said. He popped the emergency laser rifle from its rack and pointed it at the figure.

The figure said, "The hour has come."

"Stay away from me," Elms said.

"Soon you will no longer see me," the figure said, "unless I drink of your blood and eat of your body. Glorify yourself that I may live." The figure moved toward Elms.

Elms fired the laser rifle. The figure staggered and bled. *It was Travis's blood, Agneta realized. In him. Not his own blood. This is terrible.* She put her hands to her face, terrified.

"Quick," she said to Elms. "Say, 'I am innocent of this man's blood.' Say it before it's too late."

"I am innocent of this man's blood," Elms whispered hoarsely.

The figure fell. Bleeding, it lay dying. It was no longer a bearded man. It was something else, but Agneta Rautavaara could not tell what it was. It said, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?"

As she and Elms gazed down at it, they

watched intently as the figure died.

"I killed it," Elms said. "I killed Christ." He held the laser rifle pointed at himself, groping for the trigger.

"That wasn't Christ," Agneta said. "It was something else. The opposite of Christ." She took the gun from Elms.

Elms was weeping.

The Earthpersons on the Board of Inquiry possessed the majority vote, and they voted to abolish all activity in Rautavaara's artificially sustained brain. This disappointed us, but there was no remedy for such as we.

We had seen the beginning of an absolutely stunning scientific experiment: the theology of one race grafted onto that of another. Shutting down the Earthperson's brain was a scientific tragedy. For example, in terms of the basic relationship to God, the Earth race held a diametrically opposite view from us. This of course must be attributed to the fact that they are a somatic race while we are a plasma. They drink the blood of their God; they eat his flesh; that way they become immortal. To them, there is no scandal in this. They find it perfectly natural. Yet to us it is dreadful. That the worshiper should eat and drink its God? Awful to us; awful indeed. A disgrace and a shame—an abomination. The higher should always prey on the lower; the God should consume the worshiper.

We watched as the Rautavaara case was closed—closed by the shutting down of her brain so that all EEG activity ceased and the monitors indicated nothing. We felt disappointment. In addition, the Earthpersons voted out a verdict of censure of us for our handling of the rescue mission in the first place.

It is striking, the gulf that separates races developing in different star systems. We have tried to understand the Earthpersons, and we have failed. We are aware, too, that they do not understand us and are appalled in turn by some of our customs. This was demonstrated in the Rautavaara case. But were we not serving the purposes of detached scientific study? I myself was amazed at Rautavaara's reaction when the Savior ate Mr. Travis. I would have wished to see this most holy of the sacraments fulfilled with the others, with Rautavaara and Elms as well.

But we were deprived of this. And the experiment, from our standpoint, failed.

And we live now, too, under the ban of unnecessary moral blame.

PHILIP K. DICK

AN APPRECIATION BY MICHAEL KURLAND

In the Pantheon of science fiction writers, in that durasteel Valhalla with eternaglas spires reserved for those who Talked the Talk and Walked the Walk, Philip Kendred Dick's place is at the round table in a special corner of the Great Marbleoid Hall next to the electric fire—the table reserved for those who have striven and succeeded in that most noble and most difficult task a writer can attempt: making his readers think.

It is good to entertain one's readers; but, after all, that is a given. The reader is not captive. If he is not entertained in some suitable fashion, he will close the book. Making the reader empathize with the characters, making the reader laugh, cry, gasp in fear, tremble with delight—all these gain the writer a seat in the Great Marbleoid Hall. But making the reader *think*, ah, there is the test of the Hero. For such is the round table reserved. And there sits Philip K. Dick now, deep in argument with the lady on his left.

It is my feeling that Phil, in his own mind, wrote neither science fiction nor fantasy. Conceivably, he didn't write fiction at all. Dick spent his life in a strange and alien universe, which interfaced with ours only occasionally, briefly, and unpredictably. He was the chronicler of Oz. It was his genius to be able to transcribe the vision of his universe in all its mad glory, and to exhibit it before his readers like a wizard lapidarist displaying the many facets of a prize adamant.

Phil wrote of the future, yes, but it was the fearsome future of his personal world—a world where the free will of man was increasingly hedged in by the obsessive rules of a society not of his making and by the bizarre abilities of machines past his understanding.

The question of free will permeates Phil's writing. For him the individual mind was the ultimate castle, constantly under siege by the blind forces of nature, the enmity of one's fellow man, and the cunning malice of animate machines.

Philip K. Dick's fiction is a complex mosaic of ideas, personalities, contrivances, devices, and imagery, contained in a multilayered universe which only gradually reveals itself. It is a universe usually not very pleasant, though the people in it are, if anything, all too human. No heroes to be found here; just fallible human beings, endowed by their creator with fair shares of greed, fear, ignorance, and ineptitude. And these mundane people, with whom we reluctantly but forcefully relate, go through their dreary daily chores in fearsome and oppressive surroundings, the least of which would daunt a Heinlein hero.

Although he concentrated on his protagonist and the human situation surrounding him, Phil Dick was unusually profligate with those structural and social ideas that are the heart and muscle of science fiction. Phil would throw away in a one-line reference a notion around which some less holophrastic writer would craft an entire novel. The film *Blade Runner*, for example, is based on something less than five percent of the Philip K. Dick novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

We can see ourselves mirrored in a Phil Dick novel. We see the world around us and its various institutions, but the Phil Dick mirror gives us a very special view. We look around facades and behind screens and clearly discern the confused little man turning the cranks and pulling the knobs that operate the Mighty Wizard.

Philip K. Dick, a prolific, internationally renowned SF author, died of a stroke on March 2, 1982 in Los Angeles, California. He was 53 years old.

Michael Kurland, himself an SF author (including Pluribus and The Unicorn Girl), knew Dick well when they both lived in Marin county.



He could afford the best, but this one was on the house

ONLY YOU FANZY

BY SHERWOOD SPRINGER

Throughout the habitable domes of the solar system, from Venus to the moons of Jupiter, there are beings who will tell you, if the subject comes up, that the Titanians as a race are shrewd, crafty opportunists of a high order.

This, of course, is a myth. True, there are natives of Titan who may possess these characteristics, but they are probably no more numerous, relatively speaking, than similar inhabitants of any other clime. If pressed for an example, however, one might bring up Mr. Lefkoviz.

One evening, at the tail end of a business trip to Mars, Mr. Lefkoviz rode a rack-shu along the silicon streets of Crater City until, finally, he reached the D2 Mescence Mall. Fanz's Place was third on the left.

Mr. Lefkoviz banged on the door with his muggerstik. Through a peephole a pair of purple eyes gave him the once-over. The door slid sideways, and Mr. Lefkoviz crossed the threshold.

"Can I help you?" the girl asked. Clad only in sandals and a simple yellow tunic that was draped to a point fifteen centimeters below her navel, she was obviously a Callistan, violet skin and all.

"I'm looking for Fanz," Mr. Lefkoviz said.

"You have an appointment?"

"No appointment."

"Can you tell me the nature of your business?"

"In such a place there is another kind of business?"

"Oh," the girl said. "In that case I'll show you around."

"No, I have to have Fanz."

"I'm sorry. That's impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"For one thing, Fanz's not one of the girls. She's director here. And for another, she's retired. From floor duty, that is."

"That she can be telling me herself. Tell her Mr. Lefkoviz is here."

Persistence may indeed be the most powerful force in our society. It was obvious the violet-skinned filly was not going to dissuade Mr. Lefkoviz from reaching his objective. She decided to let her boss handle the situation.

The director was working on government forms when Mr. Lefkoviz was ushered into her office. If one liked his females

ample, Fanz was ample. What was more, even a critical connoisseur of amplitude would have been forced to admit that Mother Nature, in overendowing, had used fine judgment in contouring the landscape.

"What do you want?" Fanz asked.

"I want you, Fanz."

"Are you some kind of nut or something?"

"Is it only a nut, Fanz, that would ask for you?"

At this, she dropped the papers on to her desk and looked at Mr. Lefkoviz with mild interest. Middle-aged, balding a little on top, a certain thickening at the belt line, and apparently an outlander with antecedents not dissimilar to her own, Mr. Lefkoviz in no way turned her off physically. In addition, he had that air of assurance, quiet humor, and flattering determination. He also was—

Fanz slapped a lid on her thoughts. She already had an adequate lover. As for business, going back on the floor was just retrogressing.

"Mr. Lefkoviz, it's out of the question. One of my delightful playmates will take care of you. Have you ever been caressed by a furry woggie from Ceres? She's soft as a teddy bear."

"No, Fanz. A woggie I don't want."

"How about a mermaid, then? They do it, too, you know. You just have to know which scales to lift."

"Oh? Every day I learn."

"How about trying one of our rare woo-woo androids, imported from Stateside? Among other things, she'll blow your mind."

"No."

"Well, then, we come to the giant vulva plant from Venus. You can slip into her up to your armpits. Believe me, the massage you get from her is the living end. I mean *ultimate*."

"It's no use. My mind is made up. For you I've got plenty of robes. How much do you want?"

There is no shaking this clown. Fanz thought. Her simplest course was to name a figure so outrageous the poor john would have to beat a retreat. She stood up, stretched her arms out to the side, and gazed down at her extensive mammary

architecture. Sums clicked in her head.

"We're looking at five hundred robes, Mr. Lefkoviz," she said.

Mr. Lefkoviz was also staring at the architecture. Then, pulling out a small roll of currency, he peeled off five crisp hundred-roble notes and placed them on the desk in front of her.

"So who haggles?" he said.

Fanz took a deep breath and let it escape through her teeth. There was no way out for her now, but—what the hell, she thought, five hundred robes was five hundred robes. As she picked up the money and placed it in a desk drawer, she couldn't help wondering what the current record was in the *G'ness Book*.

An hour later she accompanied him personally to the door. It certainly had been an interesting evening. Maybe she *should* keep her hand in occasionally just for practice. Too bad Lefkovizes came along only once in a lifetime.

In that, Fanz was wrong.

Early the next morning the door in D2 Mescence Mall was again hammered by a muggerstik. There stood Mr. Lefkoviz.

"All night I couldn't sleep, thinking of you," he said to Fanz, who hadn't yet got the blanket fuzz out of her eyes.

"My God, Mr. Lefkoviz, it's the crack of dawn. Can't we have some coffee?"

"So fine, bring coffee."

Fanz looked at him with suspicious eyes. "My price, you know, is no cheaper this time."

Without a word Mr. Lefkoviz brought out what was left of the roll and handed it to her. She leafed through it and found it precisely correct. They dawdled through coffee, and Fanz led him upstairs.

This time, at leave-taking, she held onto his hand. All things considered, clients of his caliber should be tendered some appreciation.

"When am I going to see you again?" she asked.

"Who knows?" he said. "I'm going back to Titan today."

"Titan? Why, what a coincidence! My mother lives on Titan."

"I know," said Mr. Lefkoviz. "She gave me a thousand robes to give to you."

PAINTING BY ERNST FUCHS



LESSON ONE

*He was a master of illusion,
while his student
was obviously too naïve to learn*

BY JAMES RANDI

The Great Rumson was quite accustomed to the excitement that usually went along with his entry into Flosso's Magic Emporium. The young students of conjuring—those who managed to persevere beyond the preliminary stages of finger exercises and card palming—would press him for autographs on scraps of paper and ask him the same set of inane questions that had been asked for the past five decades. Mounting the stairs to the shop, Rumson braced himself for the somewhat pleasant ordeal that went along with his position in the conjuring fraternity.

As he walked through the doorway, he noted with feigned surprise that only one youngster leaned across the counter in conference with old man Flosso, who was outlining the intricacies of a small wooden box that delivered a silver dollar when touched in the right

way. A huge backpack was propped against the wall, and Rumson plopped into a chair beside it with a brief nod to Flosso. He noted that a copy of Marlo's book stuck out of the pack. It meant this boy had better taste than most of them, and he looked up just as the youth turned to meet his gaze.

Smiling when he recognized Rumson, he stepped forward to shake his hand. His name, he said, was Willie, and he had come from very far to visit Flosso's. As the older man listened, he heard something more behind the superficiality of the boy's words. He wanted more than an autograph, Rumson knew. And at last, amid the shoptalk and polite inquiries, came the Big Question.

An hour later, after earnest conversation over coffee, Rumson and the boy were agreed that they had become teacher and pupil. A wondrous chemistry

PAINTING BY GREG HILDEBRANDT

seemed to have sprung up between them. With total candor, Willie admitted that he had been in trouble with the law. Nothing serious, but it had meant not graduating. To Rumson, the pattern was familiar. His long-standing and often-confirmed claim was that people who entered this calling were misfits unable to find a proper fit with the rest of humanity—odd-shaped personalities with hard-to-accept ways of thought and behavior who carved their own places in society by synthesizing a fantastic environment of their own. He recognized in the eager youngster the hunger that he himself had felt at that age—the need to learn and grow in this difficult business. It was only done at the feet of a master, and as the two of them stepped into the huge house that the boy had only read about but had not dared to hope he might visit, Rumson felt the weight of his suddenly acquired responsibility.

There was the required tour of the place, with pauses to examine the artifacts gathered over the years from all parts of the world. They found the secret buzzer that opened the bookcase, which revealed a locked door behind it. They noted the strange wall clock with the numbers subtly transposed. A clap of the hands—performed just so—flooded the house with *The Planets* of Gustav Holst from concealed speakers.

The questions spilled from the boy without pause, and by the time they troubled to look, it was past midnight. The small room, the one with the sloping ceiling against the roof, was assigned to the kid. Meanwhile, Rumson went about covering up the birdcages and latching the doors in the usual bedding-down routine. Rumson wondered how this pupil would work out, but he gave up such speculation as premature. It would be weeks before he would be able to answer that question.

As he ushered the cat out of his den for the night, he heard a small voice at the top of the stairs. The boy, outlined against the hall light, called him. "Mr Rumson, do you... do you know about the *real* magic, too?"

Rumson's heart sank as he heard these words. He had been hesitant to broach that subject with the boy, hoping that it would never come up. Palmistry, astrology, all the usual claptrap, he supposed. The other student, years back, had been like that, always coming up with that kind of crap. That one hadn't lasted long.

"You'd better come down here, and we'll talk awhile," Rumson said. As the boy made

his way down the narrow stairs, Rumson began taking well-worn books from the ceiling-high cases. There were the long rows of books that were marked with red dots on the spines. Those were on conjuring. Although there were many volumes on that subject, there were twice as many that bore blue labels—the group Rumson preferred to call the bullshit section. From among them the older man chose several.

The boy seemed rather apprehensive. Perhaps he realized that he had hit a sore spot. He couldn't help having heard about Rumson's constant battle against the paranormalists, his many articles and several books on the subject, and his frequent lectures delivered at places of learning all over the world. Rumson had discovered that the boy knew his personal history quite thoroughly, and that was part of what made him the Great Rumson.

"Look, young man. I've been poking about in this magic business twice as long as you've been alive. Do you know what *magic* really means? The dictionary says it's 'an attempt by man to control nature by means of spells and incantations.' Well, I've tried spells and incantations. They don't work. Cheating works. That's what you and I are involved in. We're actors playing the parts of magicians. But *real* magic? As the man said, 'No, Virginia, there is no Santa Claus.'"

"I think you're wrong," the boy said very quietly. There was a total stillness in the room, broken only when Rumson took a deep breath and looked over his glasses at the boy, who met his gaze confidently.

"Well, I may be. And perhaps you can prove it. But I very much doubt it." He put his hand on the small stack of books that he'd selected. "I've confronted the authors of all these books—scientists, mind you—and I've beaten every one of them flat." He could not resist the dramatic gesture that suggested itself, and with his index finger he toppled the stack across the table.

"I've gone about for fifteen years now offering this check," he said, tossing into the boy's lap the thin black wallet that he'd waved before so many other audiences, "payable to *anyone* who can produce just one 'psychic' miracle for me. Fifteen years. And I never gave up a nickel."

They both waited. Rumson's cat walked stiff-legged across the table, picking her way among the fallen books. The huge clock on the far wall ticked thunderously. Then the boy spoke.

"I've been doing some things I don't un-

derstand. I came to the city to look for you because I thought you perhaps could tell me what it's all about. I've been to some of the labs where they test these things." He touched one thick volume on the table. "I spent a whole day with this guy. He was a dummy. Fell for everything. Used to read magic magazines and thought he knew the whole thing. Anything I did fooled him, and he wanted to stick me in a cage to test me." Looking a bit taller than before, the boy slid off the chair and stood up. "But I didn't show him any of the real stuff, because he thought he could stick it in a test tube."

"Go to sleep, Willie. We'll talk in the morning," Rumson said with a sigh. And, he thought silently, in the morning either he'd convince him he was wrong or he'd be on his way. The years that had passed had not faded the memory of his own battle against the irrationality that hinted of supernatural powers that seemed just out of reach, and he was not about to enter the lists again to fight that enemy.

The boy climbed to the upper room, followed by the fickle cat, and Rumson turned wearily to his own room and sleep.

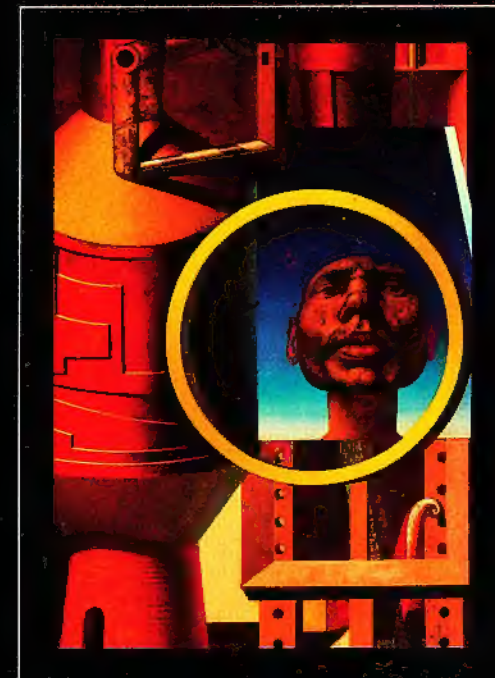
Like electricity. No, more like the smell of a hot soldering iron. It was a foreign sort of flavor in the air that Rumson could not label but that had brought him out of bed with a start. A glance showed it was very close to sunrise, and there was a tingling presence all about that was not part of any experience he'd ever known. It had to be the boy, he thought, and he headed for the stairs. The door to the room was just barely open, and the cat lay sphinxlike staring into the soft gray glow that came from beyond that door. As he mounted higher, the tingling and the tension he felt mounted, too.

He reached the landing. Now he saw into the boy's room. Willie was seated on the rug, forehead beaded with sweat, totally occupied with staring at a ball-point pen that lay before him. The tip of the pen rose slowly and sank again. Again it rose, and it remained erect. The entire pen rotated and then rose an inch, then two. The boy was frozen in the effort. Rumson walked into the room to the boy's side, and he didn't know whether he made a sound. He knew what he had to do.

Together, the pupil and the master put their wills to work on the object before them. It rose strongly this time, steadily and surely.

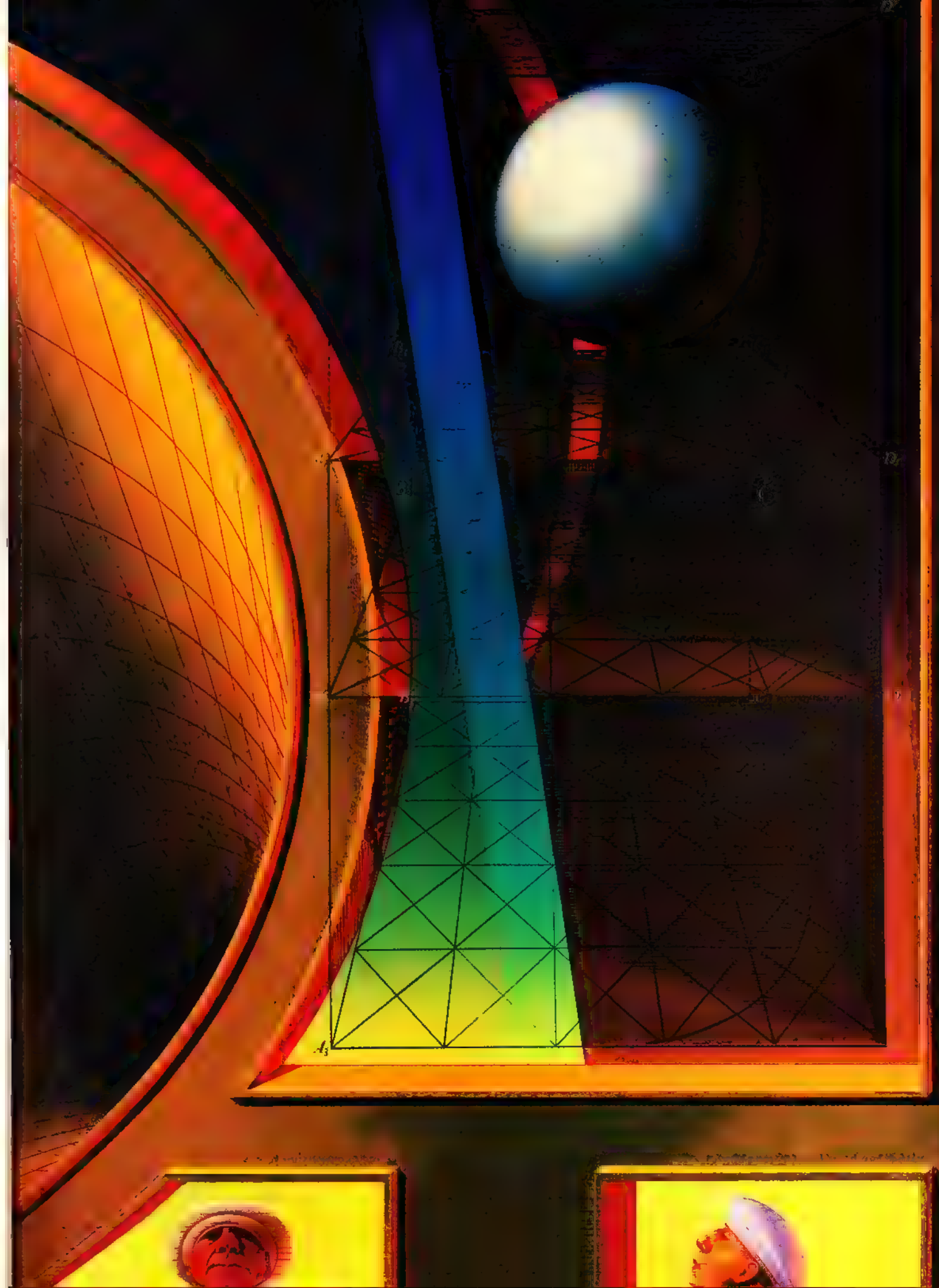
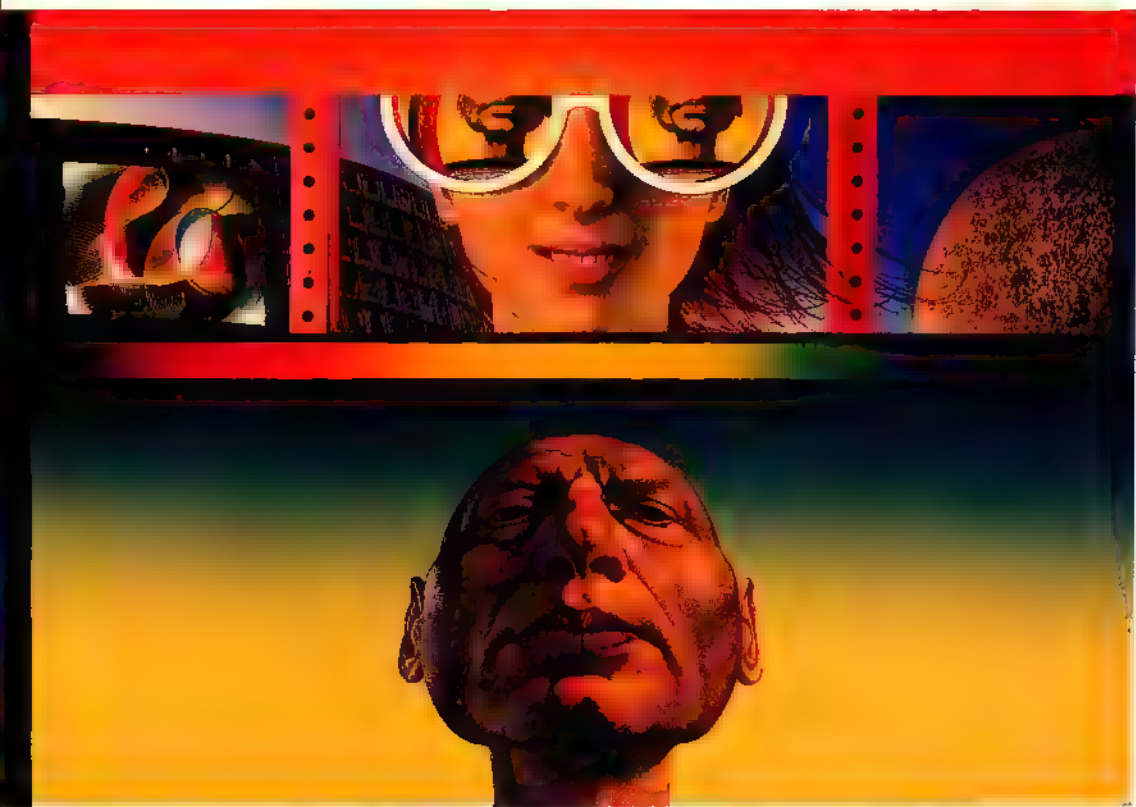
In the back of Rumson's mind a thought flitted. He had not been a pupil in a long time. This was real. This was Lesson One.

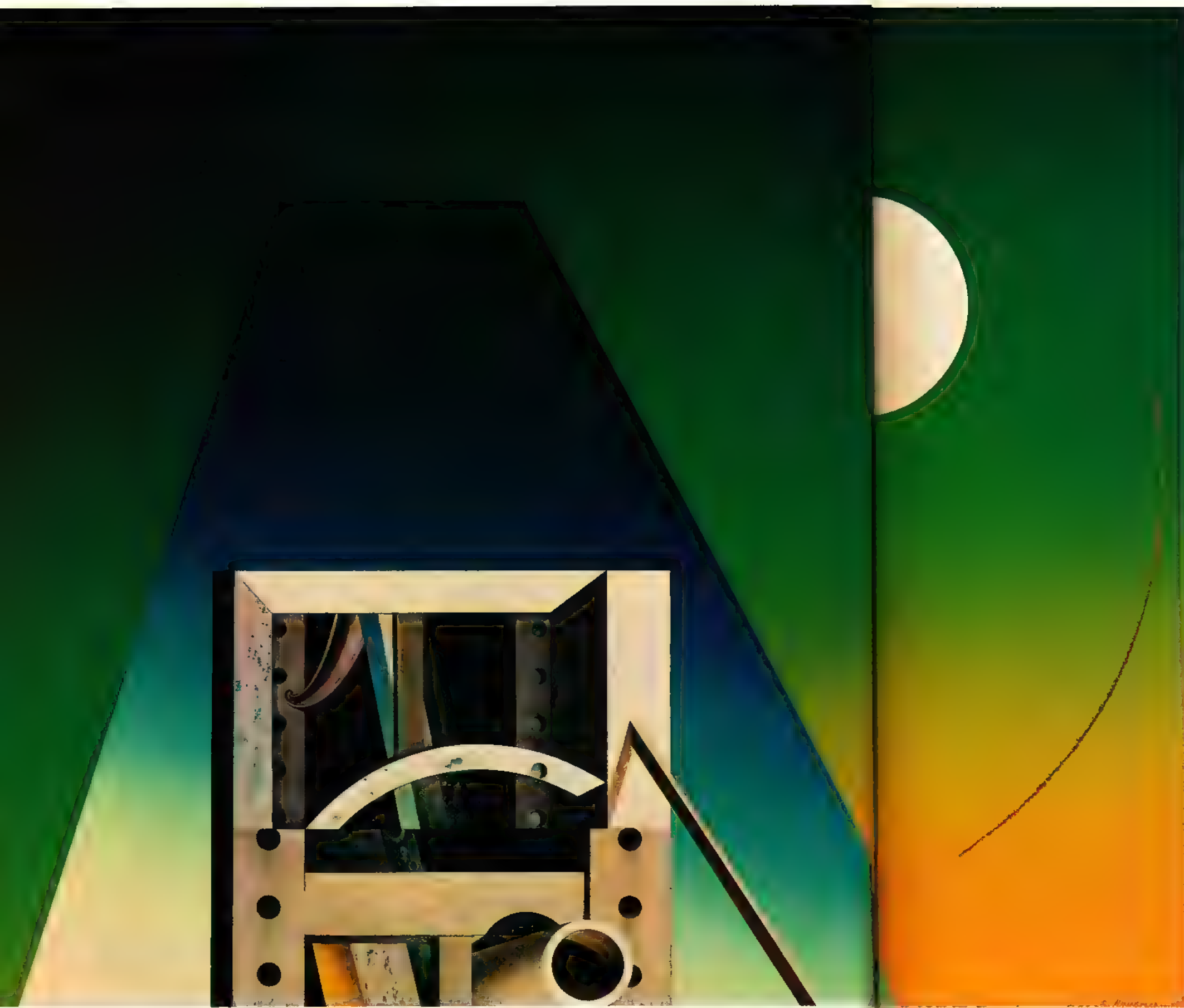
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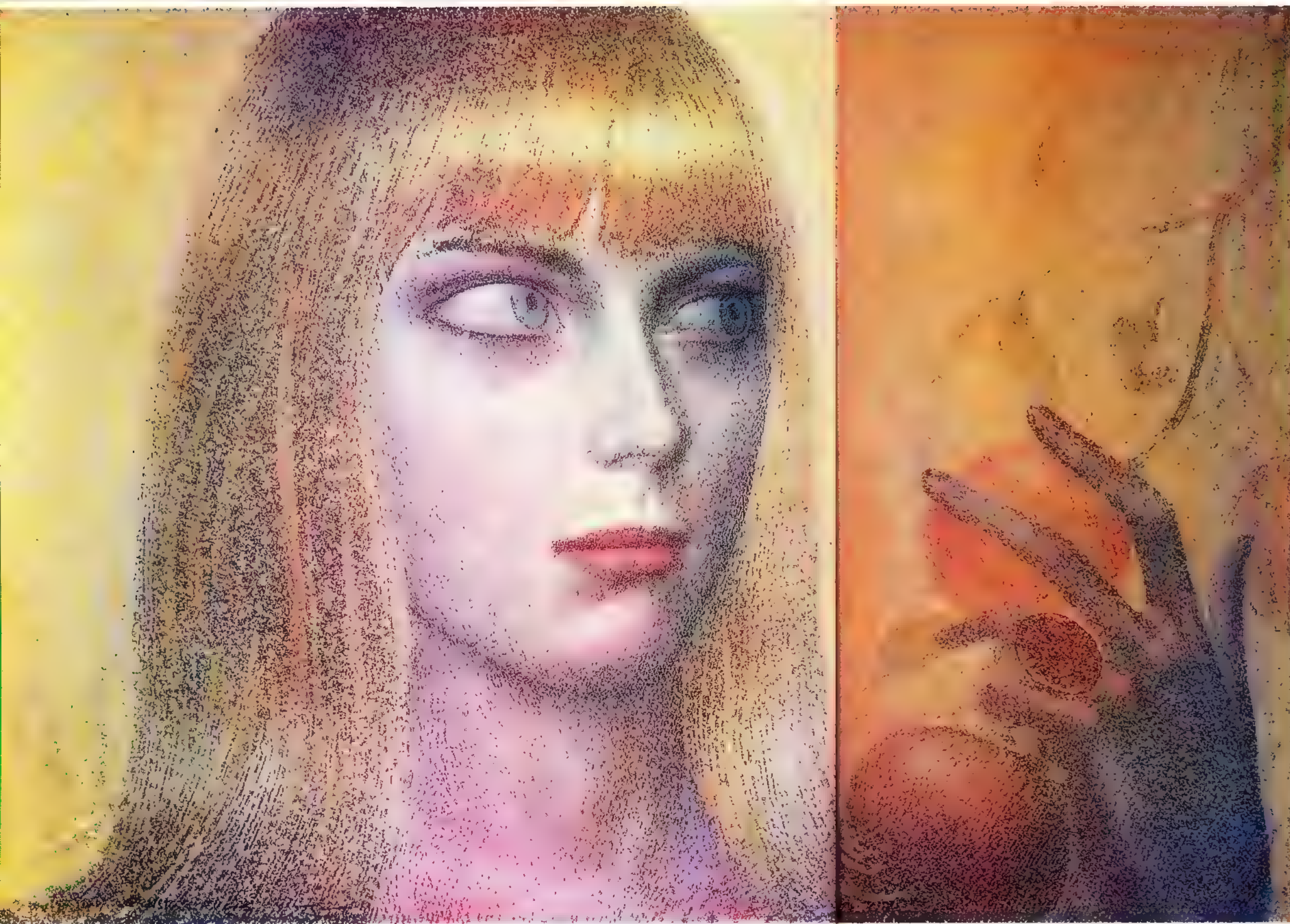


RUDOLF HAUSNER ARTIST









THE HUNTING OF HEWLISH

They were out to snare a sailor and found themselves caught in their own trap

BY SAM NICHOLSON

Sibyl stood at the vast, blue-tinted window, swept aside the gossamer draperies with both arms, and gloated over the blue Azorean Sea; over floating gardens, lily-padding in clusters; over helix-caged towers like the one in which she was so luxuriously installed.

"Oh, Roxanne, come and see!" she called to her twin sister.

Roxanne tied the jeweled belt of her chatoyant silk dressing gown and stepped to the window. The girls were blondes of rare beauty, not identical, but complementary.

"What shall we do first?" Sibyl asked.

"Go hunting, of course," replied Roxanne. "What else is there to do at a holiday resort?"

"Whom shall we hunt?"

"The wealth of the galaxy has come for the regatta."

"Oh, I'm bored with wealth. We don't need wealth."

"We'll need it later."

"We'll hunt it later. Who else is here?"

"The rulers of the galaxy."

"We'll hunt rulers when we're ready to mate."

"You're very difficult today, Sibyl. There's no other prey than wealth and status."

"Nonsense. If we look, we'll find exciting prey."

They stood shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, and watched the scene. Far below, gleaming white sails fluttered at an edge of the floating platform. The sails lightened, skimmed

PAINTING BY ERNST FUCHS

like low-soaring birds over the deep blue Terran waves

"How beautiful!" Roxanne exclaimed

"From here, yes. A wretched sport. One climbs into a narrow shell that dips and tilts—and the sun inflames the skin—and the salt foam stings the eyes—and one must grasp horrid, wet ropes."

"We've never hunted sailors."

"That's true. But let's hunt them on land."

"A hunt is a hunt, dear Sibyl. Shall we share or divide our prey?"

"Sailors are not wealthy men. Even a whole one apiece will scarcely make the hunt worth the effort."

How can you be so stupid? Sailing is a wealthy sport."

"And therefore, dear Roxanne, the sportsmen are poor."

Sibyl turned with a frowning face and sank into the soft cushions nested on the opalescent floor. She picked up a crystal cube and pressed it.

An inner wall of the room became a viewing screen. Rainbows pinwheelled into infinity as a voice asked "Anima, Vegetable or Mineral?"

"Anima!"

"Primates or nonprimates?"

"Primates."

"Human or subhuman?"

"Human."

"Terran or Galactic?"

"Hold!"

The pinwheel froze. Sibyl called to Roxanne. "Come and help me. How do I answer? There are sailors on all the water planets."

Roxanne swung from the window and sat beside her sister. "Well, do we want to hunt Galactics?"

"I really can't like Galactics. They're either the wrong shape or too knobby or wear their ears and eyes at odd angles."

"Then you know the answer."

Sibyl restarted the pinwheel and said "Terran."

The voice intoned "Name the categories, from the greater to the lesser."

Sibyl sighed and said carefully, "Human sports. Sailing. The Atlantic Rift Regatta. Now inform."

The pinwheel gave place to a view of the sailcraft now jostling for position beyond the starting buoys for the first race.

"Oh, drat," said Sibyl. "I programmed wrong. These are only the boats."

"You should have continued the categories and said 'Teams.' Now you'll have to begin all over again."

"I won't. I hate voice programming. It was my worst subject at school, Roxanne. Dear begin all over again for me."

"No. Let's watch the boats. How else can one hunt sailors?"

Sibyl leaned back against the cushions, one arm curved over her head. "I wonder. Does passion rose scent go with sailing?"

"The boats are very beautiful."

Sibyl's smooth, curling ashes sank to rest on her cheeks, and she slept.

The race took all afternoon to sail the ancient Olympic circle. Roxanne followed the maneuvers closely. When the race was over, she softly ordered the screen, "Hold for further category."

The three-dimensional scene froze in its exuberance of sail and spray. Roxanne looked at her sister. Sibyl was staring passively.

"Teams," Roxanne murmured to the cube. "Today's winner. Now inform."

A sailboat flashed onto the screen and froze for a moment while the voice said, "Name, *Terran Hope*." Another flash, and a grizzled, still-handsome old salt stood there, a broad smile on his face and a sharp squint to his eyes. The voice said "Name, Captain Mack."

"Truly a brave breed," Roxanne observed, "to court wind erosion of the flesh and solar burning."

One after another the *Terran Hope's* crewmen were displayed on the screen until a firm-jawed young man looked into the recording lens. They scrutinized his handsome face. He had a serious countenance and was frowning slightly as if resenting the necessity of facing the throng of reporters gathered for the regatta.

The voice intoned "Name, Hewish." Roxanne gasped, "Hold!" She studied the young man, then said "Clear!"

The screen resumed being a wall. Roxanne jumped up. Sibyl stirred and responded languidly "Where are you going?"

"Hunting. Will you come?"

"Beating the bushes isn't my style."

"No, dear Sibyl. You're the python coiled on a limb above the water hole."

"The regatta teams will be at tonight's ball. Good hunting, sister."

Roxanne left the room and entered her dressing alcove.

Sibyl lay dreamily winding a bond curl around one pearly finger, thinking of Hewish—the hunting of Hewish.

The sailcraft bobbed in their slots about the yacht basin, prows to the pier and stern

lines to buoys aft. The sails had been taken down and stowed away, carefully, and the masts were but skeletons of glory.

The sailors were still leaving the boats. Only Captain Mack and young Hewish remained aboard the *Terran Hope*.

The skipper eased the tension of the jibstay, walked the helmsman to the cockpit, where Hewish was sitting, and grunted, "Coming ashore? We won't be altering anything for tomorrow's race."

"I'll stay awhile, Captain. I'm enjoying the sea, wringing my holiday of every drop."

"You're fatigued."

"I'm enjoying that, too."

"As you like."

Captain Mack turned toward the bow again but stopped. A slim white-coated girl sun-cowled and gazed was standing on the pier. Under the cloak her daytime suit clothed her in gold from her cushioned soles to her throat.

She spoke in a low voice "Captain Mack, congratulations. I'm Roxanne. May I come aboard?"

"Sorry, no."

"Why not?"

"To be frank, I know about you and your sister, the huntresses. The *Hope's* win today gives us honor, not wealth."

"I'm not hunting now. I'm curious. What is this satisfaction for which you roughen and abuse your body?"

Hewish had come forward from the cockpit. The freedom of direct action without robot interference. He spread out his palms "These hands haul the sails."

"Thus you've bruised and wounded them."

"And toughened them."

"How strange! I thought you would say the beauty of the boats fascinated you."

"The aliveness of the boats. My own aliveness. It's a feeling Terra lost many centuries ago. Look at you, Roxanne—cosseted, eating what robots give you, making up deficiencies with pills instead of with air and sunlight. A huntress? I pity the fool who lets you catch and breed him!"

"But I'm not hunting now. I don't understand the aliveness of sailing. Can you explain it?"

"It can't be meaningfully explained, only experienced."

"Take me sailing."

Captain Mack growled "Ask at the other boats."

"No. I expect to be drenched, buffeted, bruised, and salt stung. The only compensation will be the undergoing of the fright-

ful ordeal with the expected winners."

"You'll get seasick, too," the skipper grumbled.

"What's seasickness?"

Captain Mack smiled. "Want to sail, hey? Come here at 0900 hours tomorrow. Hewish and I will take you for a short run before the wind freshens."

"Thank you. I'll be here."

She bowed and walked away, swiftly and gracefully.

Hewish asked, "Why did you do that?" "To get rid of her. She'll forget and oversleep. Huntresses don't rise early."

"Why would men pay to have her? Sex is free, reciprocal."

"It's not payment on demand. The men enjoy—and bestow—endow."

"What for? It doesn't seem logical."

"It's not. It's a primitive magic—a bewitchment. Stay clear of Roxanne and Sibyl. Hewish or before you know it you'll be without a credit to your name."

"Heed your own warning, skipper. You were the one who invited her aboard."

She won't come. Don't sit here wondering about her. There'll be plenty of women at the ball tonight."

The first-race ball was past its full tide and on the ebb when Captain Mack arrived clad in his dress uniform. He sauntered around the circumference of the great circular hall, smiled benevolently at the dancers, bowed here and there to acquaintances, and finally set his course for the tables in the refreshment bay.

Alone at a near table sat Hewish, correctly but not festively attired. He beckoned the captain to join him.

Captain Mack seated himself and said, "I thought you'd have paired off and been gone by now."

"Pairing seemed too routine—too cut and dried. The women seemed dull. I suppose it's their contrast to Roxanne."

"What could you see of Roxanne? Just a shadowed face inside a hood?"

"Well, I can't get her out of my mind. Maybe it was her voice or her manner."

"So you've been waiting for her?"

"She didn't come. I don't know what I've been waiting for. When did you get here?"

"Just now—to be courteous to the regatta committee. I'm singleminded about regattas. Women don't interest me when I'm competing. All I think about is winning."

"The winning boat will have to compete on Trivector. A shallow, rocky sea, and the three moons play havoc with the tides. The

Trivec scouts are here already."

"Let 'em scout. Could you crew out there for the *Hope*?"

Hewish drew a deep breath. "No. I can't get dispensation. You're lucky, being retired and rich enough to ride your hobby."

They sat for a moment. Then Hewish asked, "Shall I program a drink?"

"Not for me, thanks. You're not drinking either?"

"I don't like robot bartenders. The customer has nothing to say. I developed a bartender that was viable along six categories, but the chef ordered the brain for a political unit."

They continued to sit. At last Hewish came to life. "There she is! No—there's something different—"

Captain Mack glanced at the satiny-gowned blonde who was approaching the refreshment area, gracefully fending off dancebuds. He said, "That's Sibyl."

"Have you met both girls?"

"Seen 'em not met 'em. On my last transit before I retired from the starship service. They like to hunt in space. Spearing fish in a barrel—that's what it is."

Sibyl approached their table. Both men rose. She smiled. "Captain Mack? And this must be Hewish. Are you waiting for Rox-

anne?" she asked pleasantly.

The three sat down and Sibyl continued "Roxanne wouldn't come. She says she has to get up early and sail. Ridiculous, don't you think?"

Captain Mack growled "So you're hunting alone."

Sibyl shrugged languidly. "I ought to be. It's no fun without Roxanne. I'm rather sad, really. Twins sometimes are only half-people when they're alone."

"You and Roxanne will have to take separate paths when you mate," Hewish said by way of rejoinder.

"Oh, I never think of it. Roxanne keeps reminding me. I'm bored with hunting, but I really don't want a change."

"A change from what? What are you?" Hewish asked.

"I don't know. What are you—I mean when you're not sailing?"

"My job is to develop increasingly complicated robots; sail to use my human muscles and skills to know uncertainty, decisions, fatigue."

"What horrid things to know! And you must be very clever otherwise, making robots. You make me feel so stupid. Memorizing all those category responses!"

"Ga. Act. Knowledge now encompasses



es several classes of what, for all practical purposes, are infinities. No single master computer can do the sorting and reassigning. The human brain is still the most economical computer. The least it can do is the preliminary indexing. What's so difficult about responding to Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?"

"Because I never can remember how to program for fish or birds, or flyovers or hats, or wny air, water, and transportation are Mineral."

"The logic is very sound—is air Animal? Or Vegetable?"

"But I'm not logical."

"Of course you are! Every human being is logical."

"Oh, dear me, Hewish, no!" Sibyl laughed, in light musical tones that charmed him more than her gown. "I loathe boats and robots yet I'm amusing myself with a sailing captain and an expert robotist."

"Would you like to dance?" Hewish suggested.

"Oh, yes, if you'd be so kind. Just one dance, before I return to Roxanne."

The couple rose and joined the dancers waiting for the next configuration.

"Young fool!" Captain Mack muttered. "That's the last I'll see of him tonight."

But Hewish returned alone after the configuration. He said, "Her helix cab was on standby at the flyover platform."

"You didn't ask her to pair?"

"Well, no, I couldn't, somehow. She was gracious, but not interested. That is, when we were dancing I thought she was interested—and then I decided she wasn't—and then I just wanted time to stop because she was so lovely—and her voice was like music. She's..."

"Bewitching." Captain Mack completed the thought. He stood up. "I've made my appearance. I can go back to the tower and shed these confounded ceremonies."

Hewish rose also. Captain Mack said, "Plenty of girls—ready, willing, and able."

"Yes, but Sibyl makes the whole routine seem—routine."

When Captain Mack and Hewish arrived at the *Terran Hope* the next morning Roxanne was waiting in the cockpit. She was wearing a black jacket, thick black gloves, black waterproof trousers and boots, and a close-fitting black cap.

"Do we sail the circle?" she asked.

"Today's race is to be from buoy to buoy through the channels," said Captain Mack, tightening the jibstay. "We'll take a look at

the course. It's a ways wise."

Roxanne watched them rig the sails, which fluttered and whipped in the breeze. "Back sail! Cast off!"

Hewish jumped to the pier, released the bowline, and jumped back, giving the boat a vigorous shove. Captain Mack continued to warp the boat out of the slot with the boat hook. When she was clear, they hauled the sails over, she caught the wind, and the hull pivoted against the rudder.

"How marvelous! Roxanne squealed. "No power unit needed at all!"

"The wind's power," Hewish said. "Human muscles are power."

The *Hope* glided on even keel. In the narrow channels the breeze shifted, died, gusted again, and the boat tacked one way and then another.

Roxanne said critically to Hewish, who was hauling the job. "I perceive you sail by the rule book, not by the boat."

"What do you mean?"

"Always at the same moment you follow the mainsail. You don't feel what the boat wants to do."

"You think you know better than I do?"

"I think I sense the boat better."

"We won without you yesterday."

"You were sailing an open circle. In a channel the wind comes trickily. Give me the rope."

Captain Mack warned, "The boat is too light with only three aboard. She'll heel over when the wind freshens."

"Not completely over," Roxanne answered. "I observed during the race yesterday that when the sails lay over the wind spilled out and the boat righted."

Roxanne took the line in her gloved hands. Whether it was a new breeze or a quicker response, the *Hope* glided more easily.

After the last channel, when they were proceeding across the open sea, the rising wind came strongly and pulled the sail away from Roxanne.

"On the rail!" roared Captain Mack.

Hewish took hold of the jib line, close-hauled the sail, and jumped to join Roxanne, who was clinging for dear life to the tilted rail.

"How exciting!" she chirped. "Much better than hunting!"

The tower railed pouring a furrow of foam they few over the water and gained the lee of the mooring basin.

"Oh, I'm drenched!" Roxanne complained, cajoling attention. "And salt stung and sun inflamed! But I've never been

happier." She sprang to the pier. "Thank you, Captain Mack. Remember what I told you, Hewish."

She ran joyfully away.

Hewish said to the skipper, "The nerve of her! She can't really handle a job."

"Naturally—she lacked muscle power."

"I mean, in the channel. It was just beginner's luck."

"She seems to have an intuition about boats."

"But sailing has definite physical laws."

"So has singing or playing an instrument, you know."

Captain Mack said to the girl, "Sails better than I do?"

"No, Hewish. Calm down, man."

"Roxanne's too slow changing tack. She continually pays the sail."

"Yes. Forget it."

"Do you want to replace me as jibman?"

"No, what's the matter with you?"

"Well, the boat did sail better. Maybe just the weight distribution when she moved forward to take the jib."

"Will you forget it? We've got a big race this afternoon."

"Sure, sure. It's just—well—"

That afternoon Sibyl and Roxanne sank onto their cushions and programmed the channel regatta. Roxanne said, "Sibyl, you must be ready to dress and helix to the mooring basin. After the race Hewish will need consolation."

"You're certain they'll lose?"

"Thanks to my newly discovered sailing talent, yes. I've shaken Hewish's confidence, and Captain Mack's confidence in him. At crucial moments they hesitate. That's the time for you to move in."

He may turn to Captain Mack instead of to me."

"I'll come with you and divert Captain Mack."

"Even so"—Sibyl looked sulky—"Hewish isn't real prey."

"To me, Hewish seemed stubborn and disagreeable."

"You upset and confused him."

"I set him up for you. Don't you want to console him?"

"I suppose I do. I don't want him to lose the final race tomorrow."

"Then come and watch the results of my handiwork today. I've never known you to be so difficult."

The *Terran Hope* made a good start in the race but somehow lost her speed. She

fell off on the tacks and was sluggish around the buoys, and her flying dash to the finish pulled her only to a third place.

Hewish was crestfallen and would not follow the rest of the crew ashore.

Captain Mack said, "Don't take it so hard. With a first and a third, we're still leading tomorrow we'll win."

"It's the circle again, True. I'm more used to the circle."

"Of course you are. Come ashore—to the casino, perhaps."

They secured the gear, adjusted the mooring lines, and stepped ashore.

Two familiar sun-cloaked figures greeted them. "Ah, Captain Mack," said Roxanne, "now you must walk the gardens with me and explain the race in detail. I shall scold you properly for losing the current at the second buoy."

They set the buoy in the riptide. Whether from ignorance or devilment, said Captain Mack, "we'd better not inquire," and he followed Roxanne.

Hewish said to Sibyl, "May I escort you to your helix, or will you follow your sister?"

"Neither. I don't know what to do."

"About what?"

"Roxanne. She's so mischievous."

"Mischievous, indeed! I wish she had never come aboard. Let me tell you—"

Sibyl glanced around uncertainly. "Must we talk standing here?"

"No—that is—may I escort you to the pavilion?"

"Oh, yes. You must be hungry after the long sail."

"I'm disgusted with myself. I don't want to look at food right now."

"You'll have to, in the pavilion. Besides, you'll have to program for me. Food categories bewilder me."

They crossed a flower-bordered lawn and entered the pavilion. The robot maître d'hôtel flipped the number 33, and the number over a corresponding table lit up.

"Oh, I'd prefer a window table," Sibyl said.

"The robot is programmed for the convenience of the serving wagons."

"Let's step aside then. Others can take the middle tables."

Hewish looked curiously at Sibyl. "Do you often circumvent robots?"

"Doesn't everyone? Step aside and let this other couple have the table."

Hewish stepped aside. One after another, he bowed four couples ahead of them, until a window table lit up and Sibyl swept triumphantly past the glistening robot maître d'hôtel.

As they seated themselves, Sibyl said, "Program for me, dear Hewish."

"Sibyl, the food categories are simple. Breakfast, Lunch, Tea, Dinner." He reached to the center of the table and turned the order unit toward them. "Which would you like?"

"Tea—but I want pancakes."

"Pancakes are a Breakfast category."

"No. Breakfast pancakes have syrup. I want pancakes with jam."

"With Tea you can have waffles with jam."

"But I want pancakes. Sometimes Roxanne and I program both Breakfast and Tea, and I use her jam pot with my pancakes. But she really doesn't like my syrup on her waffles."

"Discard the waffles and syrup."

"Well, yes, but food wasting is the worst crime in the galaxy. I'd be arrested if I left food in a public place."

"Are you hinting that I should eat the waffles and syrup?"

"Would you, dear Hewish?"

"No, I would not. What a selfish question! I don't understand why men endow you with riches."

"Neither do I. But I did hope you'd endow me with pancakes. You said you design the robots."

"Yes—which is why I can't see how you acquired a taste for an unprogrammed combination."

"Oh, but Roxanne and I had parents! Parents make all the difference. The four of us could program for six dishes and divide and share and come home as we wished, and not a morsel was wasted."

"Was your mother as giddy as you?"

"Oh, yes. Papa said that coming home was like stepping onto a carousel. He never understood why Roxanne and I left home to seek adventure, but Mama wished us good hunting."

"Will you ever say something amusing to me, Sibyl?"

"Not while I'm hungry."

"I veto the pancakes. Choose a viable category."

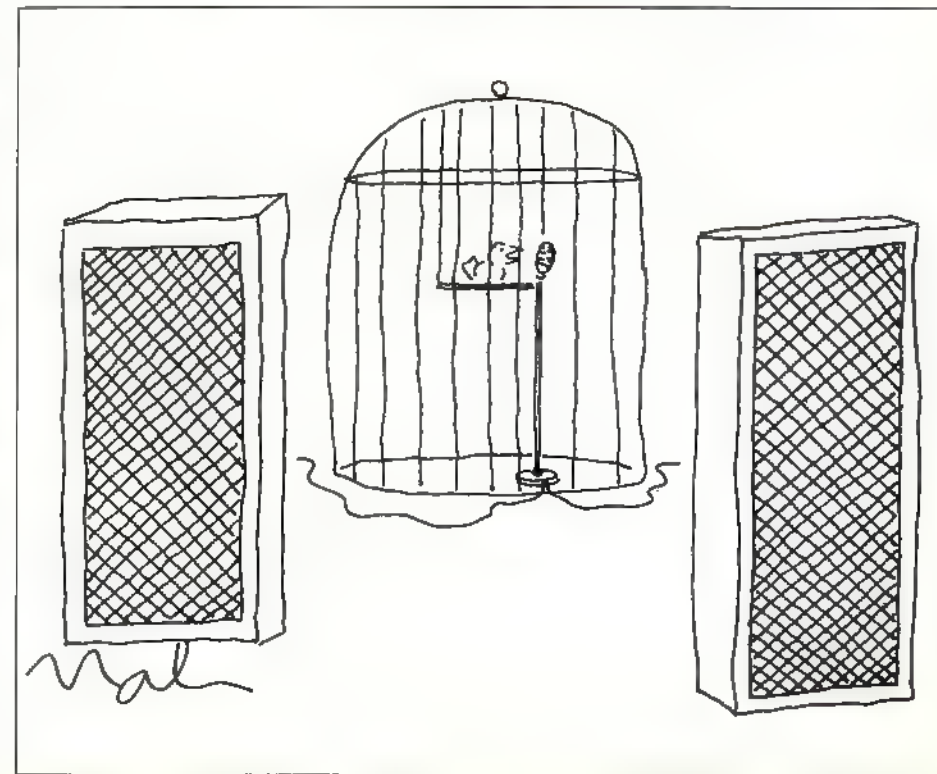
"You choose first."

Hewish programmed firmly, "Dinner. Meat—steak. Vegetable—potato crisps. Vegetable—mixed salad. Beverage—coffee. Now serve."

He looked inquiringly at Sibyl. She said, "The steaks are always small. You didn't program a dessert. You really could eat a dessert, don't you think?"

"Like waffles and syrup?"

She smiled a slow, dazzling smile. "It



would make me so very happy," she said.

He then programmed the pancakes and the waffles.

He scarcely tasted his dinner, so bewitched was he by her childish glee over the pancakes and jam. Before he realized how hungry he had been, the steak was gulped down, and the waffles followed just as quickly.

"I'm glad you suggested the pavilion," he said. "I feel much better."

Sibyl smiled to herself. "What else shall I suggest?"

"We could dance more than one dance at tonight's ball, though I would have to leave early. Tomorrow—" He stopped as if an electric shock had gone through him. "I forgot. The race—the defeat—everything. I forgot!"

"It's well forgotten. The defeat was my sister's doing."

"Captain Mack would rather have her handing the job."

"I daresay he would. And she'd put him on the rocks fast enough. How could you let such mischief destroy your self-confidence? Forget today."

"I can never forget it."

"But, dear Hewlish, you just forgot it completely."

"That was only because you were here—because you —" He paused. "Do you always keep the carousel turning?"

"It's fun, isn't it? Why stop it? When shall we meet at the ball tonight?"

"Just to dance?"

"What else does one do at a ball?"

"One pairs. If you're a huntress, you must pair."

"But I'm not hunting. Shall we meet at the same refreshment table, about nine o'clock?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Very well. Now you may see me to my helix."

Meanwhile Roxanne had been at the Sail Club with Captain Mack, scanning racks of cassettes.

"The whole sail theory, if you're interested," he said gruffly.

"I am. Such a vast array makes me feel very ignorant. I was impertinent to poor Hewlish today."

"Yes. Upset him considerably. Hope he settles down tomorrow."

"Oh, he'll regain his confidence by then."

Roxanne looked at the racks. "Sailing is a weighty matter."

"Do you read?"

"Yes. I was lucky in my schooling. My parents believed reading was a good mental discipline."

"In that case I can lend you a book that will be much less burden than cassettes on the same matter. But I'm keeping you late. Will you dine with me?"

"Yes, thank you. But only a brief meal. I'm eager to begin reading."

"Excuse me. You'll take good care of the book, won't you? Books are expensive and hard to replace. From observing you on my last space cruise, I did not suppose you even knew the alphabet."

Roxanne laughed. "Did you observe us? Sibyl and I were quite awed by your authority. It's nice to find you human."

"If I may say so, Roxanne, you're far more likable when you're not hunting."

"I enjoy being myself. How and when did it happen that literacy became the opposite of pleasure?"

"The perfection of voice programming and cassettes, I suppose, made literacy unnecessary to the lazy mind—and most human beings are lazy. Fortunately. If sailing were easy, the sport would be cluttered by robot minders and button pushers, as it was in the Early Atomic Age, when modern civilization began."

"But you'll find the history of the Sail Reform Movement in the book," he went on. "A fair breeze and human brain and muscle—there's the real sport."

"It's all very exciting," Roxanne agreed.

When Sibyl returned from the ball at midnight, Roxanne was reading Captain Mack's book.

"You're taking great pains for my sake," said Sibyl.

"Captain Mack is no fool. By tomorrow my homework must be thoroughly done."

"You underestimate my own powers with Hewlish."

"Never. You danced closely, I assume. He was dizzied by your touch, your perfume, your inconsequential hypnotic chatter. Did you pair?"

"I think Hewlish is worth more than pairing. It would be fun to direct an inventive mind."

"Why, Sibyl! Would you mate with him?"

"I don't know. It would be so permanent. He's so serious. He'd never leave me while the offspring were young."

"An advantage, surely? Nursery robots are tiresome. Remember ours? Papa and Mama were very useful."

Sibyl sighed. "But I do love luxury. How

much would you let me take, Roxanne? Your jewels are grander than mine."

"Now here's a sisterly act. You leave me hunting a one and empty my jewel cases as well."

"Yes. And when you mate with a rich oligarch, I shall expect magnificent presents. Our parents endowed us unequally with brains, and it's only fair that your abundance should make up for my lack."

Roxanne laughed and returned to reading the book.

The third and final race was the closest of all. The other boats, with few chances of winning the regatta, determined to spoil the day for the *Terran Hope*. Soon the protest flag was straining from her mast top as foul after foul blocked her progress.

Sibyl and Roxanne were watching the race on the viewscreen.

"How unfair!" said Sibyl. "A protest does no good from a tenth place."

"But the fouls only increase the crew's angry efforts."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Never before had the *Terran Hope* been so tightly hauled. Never had she sailed so close to the wind. Her opponents fell off to leeward, and she outsailed them easily, racing between the orange finish buoys with a clear victory.

"They've won! Come, Sibyl," Roxanne said, standing up. "Now we can claim our prey."

"Our? Sibyl wondered."

This time the *Terran Hope* was not so easily approached. The pier was crowded with well-wishers, regatta commiteemen, and Trivec officials who had come to offer the formal challenge.

Sibyl and Roxanne waited until the ceremonies were completed and the crowd was thinning. Hewlish saw them and went up to them. They congratulated him, and Roxanne strolled toward the boat.

Hewlish said to Sibyl, "Roxanne must feel foolish, doubting my abilities."

"We both are pleased you won. But the victory has agitated you. I doubt that uncertainty decisions, and fatigue are as pleasant as you boasted."

"They're pleasant to experience and overcome. The reliving of them is unpleasant—the thought of how near we came to failure. That's why I'm glad to see you, Sibyl. With you, I can remember the victory and forget the anxiety."

Victory soon erases anxiety. With you

dance with me at tonight's ball, please?"

"Will you pair afterward?"

"Hewish, I like you too much. I don't want to pair with you as I'd pair with prey. You're too fine and honest. I wish the holiday could go on forever."

"It can—as long as our nonsensical carousel keeps turning. Will you mate with me? I have little wealth, but you'd share it equally such as it is."

"Oh, I accept you, dear Hewlish! I'm sorry you're not yet rich, but I'll never find a mate more clever or sensible."

Hewish put his arms around her, pulled off her sunhood, kissed her smooth lips and laid his cheek against her glossy hair. She gently freed herself. "We must dine and dress for the victory ball."

"A victory with n and beyond a victory!" Hewish exclaimed.

Roxanne had been talking to Captain Mack. They saw Hewish embrace Sibyl, and the skipper scowled. "She caught him. I knew it. Poor fool!"

"I fear it's Sibyl who's caught," said Roxanne. "She spoke of wanting to mate with him. Not a brilliant match, but she was bored and restless. What was I to do?"

"Is Hewish your doing?"

"I chose him, yes. Sibyl never has had my zest for the chase. Her nature is softer, more attuned to mating. I'll miss her dreadfully, of course."

"You made a good team, that's for sure. The old one-two," Captain Mack said with gusto. "A man never knew whether he was coming or going. You need a change of pace, Roxanne."

"Later. When I start hunting again. Now I'm fascinated by sailing."

"Don't hand me that sludge, girl. I'm not Hewlish."

"Exactly. Hewlish crewed for the *Terran Hope*. You own her. I'm studying your book. I hope you'll find a crew place for me if I follow you to Trivector."

"Hmm. You are not nearly strong enough to be a bman."

"Skill is needed more than the light, shifting breezes than in the steady winds. I could be a bman when I pleased you, and raised crew at other times."

"I demand concentration in the regattas. You'd have to give up hunting."

"How could I hunt? When I sail, my face will be sun reddened and ugly, my hands will bruise, my arm muscles will enlarge into unsightly lumps. A ruined huntress, I fear. But the Trivector race—oh, I would give up much—everything—to win aboard

the *Terran Hope*. I promise I would."

"And then?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm a lonely man. I never mated when I was in the starship service because I would seldom have seen my mate or offspring. I didn't mate when I retired, because I met no woman who shared my passion for the sea." He paused. "Can a huntress understand that a man might have a passion for anything except—passion?"

"A huntress, of all people, knows that a man's passion is but an inner room of his heart. It must be approached by the right avenue, and there are as many avenues as there are men. Which is the fun of the hunt."

"I'll grant you all that, Roxanne, but we are still talking about two different things. Your hunt ends in a mutual passion for each other. My yearnings have been toward a mutual passion for the sea."

"And for each other," Roxanne insisted gently.

"Yes, yes, of course," the captain agreed, "but my nature is such that I cannot separate the two."

"I think the sea is such a mistress," said Roxanne, "that she floods a man's heart and must be included."

"I perceive clearly that she has flooded your heart, Roxanne. I'm fairly well off. I went on. I won't pair with you, my Roxanne, because you'd rob me and walk away. But mating is a legal and permanent commitment. You couldn't rob me without robbing yourself."

"I've never robbed anyone. Captain Mack."

"As if bewitchment wasn't robbery of a man's senses and, afterward, of everything else he possessed!"

"Now here's an odd proposal," Roxanne retorted. "The man distrusts me and yet would mate with me."

"I don't distrust your sailing. That's genuine enough to make young Hewlish green with envy. Nor do I distrust your ability to keep a mate amused, if you kept your part of the bargain."

"I've never broken faith either."

"Perhaps you think I'm too old for mating, but I'm capable of it, never doubt!"

"Never for a second would I doubt," said Roxanne, laying her hand on the captain's sleeve. "I'm happy and honored to accept your offer. You'll be a handsome mate and a wonderful sire for our offspring."

"Lucky little bastards," said Captain Mack, grinning.



*Benevolent technology,
progress and prosperity forever,
aggression and greed
almost gone—ah, that was the rub*

NEW IS BEAUTIFUL

BY TONY HOLKHAM

Eli Blair shuffled uneasily around the room, hands thrust deep in his pockets. The wind shrieked about the house like a hare under an eagle's shadow.

"Build in four dimensions?" the angel-like boy Zedac had chortled earlier that day. "Easy. How do you design a cube?"

"I wouldn't bother," said Eli nonchalantly. "If it was a perfect cube, I would just go ahead and make it."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," the boy cut in. "I said 'design' for a reason. A cube is three dimensions, which you can represent on a two-dimensional surface..."

"You mean three dimensions on two, and four on three?" The old man scratched his head. "No, it can't be as simple as that..."

The boy looked at him unblinkingly. "You're not going to tell me it's impossible, are you? Or that somebody must have thought of it already?" He shook his head, the golden hair catching the dying autumn sun. "They all say that until someone else patents the invention of a lifetime."

Eli looked sharply at the boy, then picked up a sheet of paper, tearing and folding it to form a rough cube. Twisting it this way and that, he smiled ruefully. "Paper's no good."

"Correct."

PAINTING BY MICHEL HENRICOT



The old man strode to the bookshelf and returned with a glass paperweight. He tipped it from hand to hand, and shook his head. It told him nothing.

'Getting warmer, Eli,' said the boy encouragingly.

Eli gazed, but inside he was warm with admiration. 'Why don't you tell me, you young 'mp!'

'That wouldn't be so much fun. Zodiac's eyes sparkled. 'I'll give you a clue,' he relented, closing his eyes and quoting

Far from the edge of the land,
There lies a-shifting a place
In the deep's hand . . .

His guardian raised an eyebrow. "When did you start learning Zarradine?"

"Ages ago. Last week, I think."

"I'm surprised. But I suppose I shouldn't be," Eli shrugged. "Anyway, that's an easy clue." He turned to the window, to a tank of water where in there lay motionless a small gray fish. A black dot of an eye swiveled at his approach, and when the old man's hands touched the glass the fish sprang suddenly and ferociously into life: its small, needle fangs tapping sharply against the glass. Eli carried the tank to the sink and, in one swift movement, whipped off the cover, emptied out the contents, and covered the sink with a glass sheet. He held the tank over the dryer for a moment, and when he turned back to the boy, there were a few beads of sweat on his forehead. "I swear he'll have me one day," he grinned, "but I haven't the heart to have his glands removed. Now," he said matter-of-factly, "the third cube. What do I do with it?"

"A diagram," said Zodiac simply, "a four-dimensional representation on a three-dimensional surface."

Eli sighed quietly. He shouldn't allow himself to be drawn in like this. He could teach the boy how to behave, but academically . . . "No more games," he said firmly, selecting a clay pencil from the desk drawer. "Show me."

Zodiac folded his arms, refusing the pencil. "You can't draw on the glass. It's a surface, and a surface has only two dimensions. It's what's inside, the volume, that is three-dimensional." He padded lightly to the cupboard and returned with thread and cutter.

For the next few minutes, the room was silent save for the quiet hum of the cutter and the occasional plop! from the sink. At last, Zodiac stood back, satisfied.

Eli studied the result, more struck with its artistic merits than any mathematical significance. "It's clever, but where's the fourth dimension?"

"It's not in there," said the boy. "That wasn't the object of the exercise. This is just a design, a blueprint."

Eli shook his head, sitting down heavily. "Well, I'm blowed! And is this what you've been doing at school today?"

Zodiac looked away. "Well, no, not as an assignment, not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly?" The old man touched his ward on the shoulders. "You haven't skipped school?"

"No!" cried the boy indignantly. "When I said not exactly, I meant the others were doing the industrial counterrevolution."

"I see. Now listen to me," said Eli, wagging a gnarled finger. "I pay good pension and guardianship money to send you to a free school, and you . . ."

"Hold on a minute, Eli," said Zodiac, his voice belying his child's looks. "You said you were sending me to the free school so I could be an individual, like you, and so I am. You can't deny that." He shrugged. "I can learn the industrial counterrevolution any time—I took a video of the lesson—but this dimension problem is on my mind and it's now work. History is later work. Don't worry, Eli, I won't let you down come end-of-term exams. You know I won't."

"Okay, okay," Eli held up his hands. "I don't need a lecture. I know it's not up to me what you study, but it's just that I want you to stick to what you start. Then you won't end up like I did, a drifter for the first few years of my maturity. I had a terrible job sorting myself out."

"But you did in the end. If I achieve as much as you did, Eli, I'll be satisfied."

Eli winced melodramatically. "If you don't achieve at least five times as much as I did, I'll take a stick to you." They both laughed, not because they knew he never would do such a thing, but because it was an affirmation of confidence, and it made them both happy.

They left the glass-and-thread blueprint on the desk and sat down at the small table. "I've a surprise for you," said Eli, opening a drawer in front of him and taking out a small package. He shoved it across together with the boy's two sachets.

"What is it?" asked Zodiac, tearing the paper to expose a pinkish, pasty material.

"Pâté."

"Pâté!" Carefully the boy dipped a finger into it and raised it to his mouth. His

eyes widened. "Real pâté?" Most of it disappeared down his throat in a second. "Steady!" warned his guardian. "You shouldn't have eaten all that. You know too much fresh food will make you ill."

"I couldn't help it. It was delicious."

Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it. I don't suppose it'll hurt you—can't have been more than ten grams."

Zodiac licked his fingers for the third time. "Can I give the rest to Willy?"

"Yes, but be careful. He prefers fingers."

The boy slid the glass cover on the sink aside a fraction and dropped in the last lump of pâté. It didn't touch the water. The fish gulped once and returned to the bottom. Zodiac shuddered involuntarily, replaced the cover, and returned to the table. "Why do you still keep him if he's so dangerous? It's a rather one-sided relationship, isn't it?"

Eli leaned back in his chair. "Did I never tell you?"

The boy sat down opposite him and leaned forward eagerly.

The old man closed his eyes. "When I was young, when there were still ships on the sea, I worked in a freighter carrying everything from fabrics to ore from England to North America. On the ship as well was a young, rough-edged Australasian, called Aubrey Jones, and he and I became the greatest of buddies. We had a great time, the two of us, raising hell in the ports with brawling and drinking, and suchlike. We were four days out of Liverpool when the war came, and we sat there in mid-ocean, waiting, wondering. A week passed, nothing on the radio, food supplies dwindling. You know your history. After sixteen days and nights of torment, half the crew dead of fear, hunger, or suicide, we heard it was over, so we sailed on to Boston. We survivors got blind drunk that night, and I had quite a job getting us back to the ship. Anyway, I did, and we loaded up and headed for home."

Well, you could feel the tension on the ship all the way. Aubrey and I tossed all the drink we could find over the side. There was no skipper, just a weird, democratic, vagabond crew, and how we ever made Liverpool I still don't know to this day. But we did. And the first thing we did was to collect our pay and look for the nearest bar. Well, as you know we shouldn't have found one, because it was the New Way, but we did, a little illegal tavern on a back street.

"It was the last night of the century. We

hadn't realized it until we'd already downed a few, and of course we were determined to celebrate, if no one else did. But it misfired, disastrously. Aubrey managed to get into a fight and killed a man. It cured me, because I left the ship and got a decent job. And it cured Aubrey, too, because they sent him to the moon."

Forty years he got, and forty years he served. He used to write to me regularly, and a week after his release, he'd been sent back to Australasia, to work for the Fisheries Protection Board. After that he didn't write to me so often. Inevitable, I suppose, but we never lost contact altogether. We always said we'd meet again, but somehow we were always too busy. Then in '51, I got a letter from his employers. He'd been badly mauled by a shark while trying to save a girl from drowning. There was a little note from him enclosed, and I remember it word for word. It said: Dear Trusted Friend Eli, I took on a shark the other day, but my reflexes aren't what they were when we were young. Only fight I've ever lost, but it's the last. Never mind. I've had a good run, and they tell me the little girl's going to be all right, thank God. I want you to have all my bits to do what you like with. Please look after Willy for me. He's a mean bugger, but good company. I'd swear he understands more than he lets on. Can't write any more, old friend. Take care. So long, Aubrey." Eli sighed deeply.

"So, wondering who or what on Earth Willy was, I took a weekend return to Melbourne and collected Aubrey's stuff—and Willy. His landlady told me rather sharply: Glad to see the back of the brute. Then she melted and there were tears in her eyes. He was a helluva man. Mr. Blair, she said, an awful shame he's gone. She gave me the written instructions Aubrey had given her for when he was at sea. They were very simple and typical of the sense of humor that never left him, not even when he was in prison. They said: 'Willy eats anything, 'specially fresh meat. Particularly partial to humans. One bite is fatal—to the human.'

"I seriously considered tipping dear Willy straight into the nearest furnace but kept thinking of Aubrey, so I relented and brought the beast home. He never took his eyes from me all the way. Customs was a bit funny, but I called a friend in London and he got me a license. It was only then I discovered Willy's true identity. He was extremely rare and worth a small fortune. Aubrey must have known that, and it was his

way of thanking me for sticking by him all those years. I should have sold him there and then, but once I'd turned down the first offer, the next was easier. And the brute looked at me all the time, at first sort of suspicious, but then I swear it was a secure look, knowing somehow I'll never know how I came to grow fond of such a creature, but I did."

Eli opened his eyes. "Eat your food," he ordered quietly. Then he closed them again. Anyway, I've had Willy for ten years now and I reckon he'll outlive me. He's used to my ways, and me his. I know what he likes: sunshine, duck, hard-boiled eggs. I wouldn't part with him now. I've got an antidote for his poison, but I don't think I'll ever need it. I've always been ultracareful, and so have my wards."

Zodiac split a sachet between finger and thumb and poured the contents down his throat. "Sometimes I wish," he said slowly, "I was an Old Individual. I'd like to have been a guardian like you. Will you have another ward when I'm dead?"

Eli frowned. "Don't talk like that. First of all, the New Individuals are the future, and second, I don't like you talking about your own death. You're only eight months old now, with another 20 to go, and it's not as

if your life seems any shorter than mine. . . ."

"I'm sorry," interrupted the boy. "I know what you say is true. I'm not thinking of the comparative lengths of our lives, just our lifestyle. I'm enjoying my life, of course I am. The New Way is better than the Old, but in this changeover period, think the guardians have a more satisfying task than the wards."

Eli nodded slowly. "That may be so, but the New Way is better, and that's all that matters to any of us. There'll come a time when I'm just a housekeeper to you. I know, I've seen it four times already—a time when you're so far ahead that I'll be the child and you the adult. Give it a few more months and you'll be happy with your side of the bargain."

"Nonsense!" said Zodiac sharply, tossing his golden hair. "You'll always be able to teach me something. You have the morals, the knowledge, and the honesty. I only hope we'll be able to retain it when all the guardians are gone."

"You will, boy, you will. Don't you worry. It's more than ever a technological world, but it's good technology. Benevolent technology. The New Way will inherit the best of the Old—the wisdom, the intellect, the industriousness. Humanity will progress



and prosper forever now that aggression and greed have almost gone. If ironing out the horrors in man's nature means a shorter lifespan, though a no less full one, so be it. The New Way is good." Eli's eyes bored into the boy's. "It's more than good. It's beautiful, it's perfect." He glanced up at the clock. And now . . .

"I know," sighed his ward for a moment the child again. He dutifully rose and cleared away the table. "Can I watch you catch Willy?"

"No, I'm going to leave him there for tonight. I don't want to spoil our blueprint—perhaps we can talk about it again tomorrow." He held out his hands, and Zodiac took them. "Goodnight young man. Sleep well."

When the boy had gone to his room, Eli settled into a comfortable chair from where he could see the moon through the trees on the hill above the house. Clouds were gathering, and a light breeze tugged at the shutters. There would be a storm any minute, Eli knew for he had not lived in the Cotswolds for ten years without knowing the weather patterns like an old friend.

He felt tired. Every day was a long day with Zodiac. The boy only needed three hours' sleep now and in a couple of months he would need none. Before Eli was barely asleep in his own bed, the boy would be up and gone, trotting out to 18 hours of schooling. He was growing up fast even for a ward, and it was hard to believe it was only seven months ago that Joseph Parsons, Secretary of the Fellowship of Guardians, had brought him a one-month-old, golden-haired child who could hardly walk. Zodiac had cried because of Eli's whiskers, and Eli shaved them off there and then as a token of friendship. Two weeks later the boy was beating him at simple card games. Eli shrugged inwardly. Even after five baby wards, he still found it difficult to come to terms with the incredible development rate and speeding metabolism of the new race. But he envied no man. Most Old ones, now in retirement, living out their lives in luxury in the cities, were almost obvious to the New Way taking over.

Eli Blair had believed it right from the start, right from the very first New child and blessed the day when the aggressors had obliterated themselves from the face of the earth and left the rest of the world to scramble every way of life until they came up with the answer that was the New Way. Humanity had dragged itself back from the brink of oblivion and would never again pit

itself against itself, or against Nature. And as soon as he was retired, Eli Blair devoted his every waking hour to make it work. It had to work, because now there were no destroyers, only builders. And the New children were the children of the builders.

There was no particular point during his reverie that Eli Blair's thoughts became dreams. He had long been accustomed to taking a half-hour nap before setting out the boy's meager (to him) breakfast and locking up the house, and he slipped easily into the light sleep of advancing years, his feet stretched out, his hands loose in his lap.

But when he awoke he knew it was not his mental alarm clock which had woken him. He looked out of the window: the moon had scarcely moved, so he had been asleep only a few minutes. What had disturbed him, then? Everything was still, save the rising wind, and he was on the verge of drifting off when the disturbance reached him again. This time he knew too well what it was, and he lurched drunkenly out of the chair as the third agonized yell from the back of the house penetrated his brain. Eli flung open the door to see the boy writhing on the bed, clutching at his middle. His staring eyes saw nothing, and the golden hair was dark with sweat.

The old man threw a blanket over him and fiercely punched out some numbers on the bedside comm.

Immediately, there came a tinny voice. "Emergency."

Blair, two-five-nine-zero-G. Ambulance my ward . . .

"Nature of emergency?" asked the unemotional electronic voice.

"I think it's food poisoning."

"Patient's identification?"

"Oh, for . . . Eli wiped the sweat from his eyes. No use arguing. "Zodiac, seven-two-eight-W."

"Wait please."

The next four seconds seemed like four hours. Then the voice again, "Landing space—go. Availability—go. ETA two minutes. Blair, do not give anything to patient. Keep patient warm. Keep calm. Confirm."

Confirmed. Eli cursed the machine as he dragged another blanket over the boy. Keep calm, it said! He cursed the pâté. He cursed the peddler who had persuaded him to buy it. He cursed himself for his stupidity, and he soothed the boy's brow with water from the tap by the bed.

The ambulance's siren bared from above the roof, and Eli rushed to the back door

in time to see it settle gently in the yard, the whine of the engines just audible above the wind. Two figures jumped out, both barely bigger than Zodiac, but broader shouldered. They rushed where Eli directed them, swept the boy up in a stretcher and were outside again before ten seconds were past. One of them, a girl, gasped, "Don't worry. Wait for our call," and the machine was gone, up and away like a monstrous flying egg, over the trees, to the nearest hospital specializing in the medicine of the New Way.

Eli closed the door quietly and sat down in front of his desk comm. Now he had time for the self-recrimination that had been building up since he had burst into Zodiac's room just a few minutes before. For the next five minutes he set to the mental task of taking himself to pieces, understandably but unnecessarily, and it was only the shrill tone of the comm which prevented him from driving himself insane.

He stabbed open the channel. "Yes!" A calm, young voice came through, then the screen cleared. Eli saw the face of a boy, not unlike Zodiac, but older, perhaps a year old. "Mr. Blair, I'm Dr. Rosko. Zodiac is comfortable now, but I must tell you his condition is very grave. Food poisoning is confirmed. He ate some pâté . . ."

Eli nodded slowly. "I know it was my fault. I shouldn't have bought it."

"Please, Mr. Blair, there's absolutely no blame attached to you. Zodiac's our seventh case today, and the peddler concerned has now been arrested. The pâté was accredited fit for consumption by wards, but it seems the date had been falsified."

"Oh, no!" Eli almost reeled back from the words. The old ways lingered on. You never knew when you might come across them, in a crowded street, in a back alley, there were still fragments of the old self-interest at large. Still, people ghastrightmares of the past, who could, would, put personal gain before the well-being of the race. Eli Blair remembered the old ways had been a part of them, but those 16 days of cold, unimaginable fear adrift in the North Atlantic had cured him for life. It seemed there were still those whom it had not. Eli ached from the pain of it. And Zodiac?"

he said, hearing himself almost pleading. "Don't upset yourself, Mr. Blair. You must be distressed. I know, but your ward will receive the best possible care. We are doing everything we can."

"I know. Thank you, Dr. Rosko. You will let me know how he's doing?" Without thinking, he added desperately, "Is there any chance of me seeing him, any chance at all?" But he already knew the answer—knew he could never enter a ward establishment of any kind, where things moved 30 times faster than he knew, where the environment was as alien to him as the South Pole—more so. For it was only in the presence of the old ones, like himself, that the wards slowed themselves down. Amongst themselves they lived 30 times as quickly and got 30 times as much done in the same time.

I'm sorry, Mr. Blair, you know it's not possible. You understand?" Eli took hold of himself. "Of course, Doctor. I shouldn't have asked."

"You are distraught. I suggest you take a sedative and go to bed. I will see to it you are called if there's any change."

If there's any change. The words rang in Eli's head when the Doctor had signed off. He switched off the comm and stood up, looking around the room as if it were unfamiliar to him.

The night seemed interminable. To occupy himself, Eli closed the shutters and locked up the house, swept out the bedrooms, tidied his desk. And he was now reduced to shuffling back and forth across the cluttered room, listening to the shrieking wind mingling with his waking nightmare. Thoughts of the past clashed with dread of the future. He tried to shut out the picture of the smiling, golden-haired boy who eagerly wolfed down the pâté, but it kept coming back. Guardianship might seem the best job on earth, he thought bitterly, but here was the other side of the coin. He had never been married, but now for the first time he knew what it must have been like for the thousands of women who lost babies at the height of the industrial counterrevolution, when medical services ground to a halt for a whole year. How trivial it had all seemed to him then. How he now regretted the callousness of his youth. All these memories seemed so real that he hardly heard the comm shrilling.

Eli opened the channel carefully, half-expecting . . . ? But it was Dr. Rosko.

"Mr. Blair," he said quietly, and Eli knew he knew from the face. The New ones could not hide their emotions.

"Mr. Blair, I'm sorry. Zodiac couldn't make it. He died a few minutes ago. We did what we could."

Eli nodded. "I know that."

"Will you be all right?"

"I'll be all right, Doctor. I'll ring you tomorrow about the arrangements."

When the doctor's grave face had gone from the screen, Eli Blair felt as if he was about to be torn apart. His rational nature said the New Way was still the same. Things happen. His emotions were in turmoil. He staggered up out of his seat again, drained of energy, and wandered aimlessly about the room for a few minutes. Can I go through it again? The question demanded immediate answer. A two-year guardianship was short and painful enough, despite the calculated way it was cooled down toward the end of a ward's life, and Eli Blair was old. The New Way was perfect, he had said that earlier, but was it perfect for him? However the war had changed him, he would be a part of the old way until the day he died. Was it time to go now? Had enough of human nature been instilled into the frames of the New children yet? Could they be trusted to breed on their own now and not revert to the old ways? The New children did not cry. They did not get angry. Yet they loved with unbelievable strength of will. Would this be enough to carry them through to the promised future? Eli Blair did not know. The New Way seemed to crowd in on him, and he felt his age acutely. His role was ever diminishing. The ambulance drivers, the doctor, the emergency robot, all New. Every day, less Old, more and more New. Eli knew one thing: He didn't want to be the last. He didn't want to live out the residue of his days like a dinosaur, a living relic of the past that was hateful and wasteful and best forgotten.

Half-blinded by the pain in his head, Eli stumbled against the sink. There was no hesitation in the hand that slid the glass aside and fell slowly into the cool water. He steadied himself, closing his eyes. A second passed. "Go on, you brute," he muttered, "you've been waiting for this chance for years." More seconds passed, but no pain came. He opened his eyes and looked down. Willy was listing slightly and had turned toward the hand that intruded. The small black eyes regarded Eli angrily, but he did not move. Every few seconds, his stout gray body twitched, and Eli suddenly came to his senses. The pâté! Willy, too, had eaten the pâté. And he was in agony, dying. Eli yanked a yard of traveling cable from its wall housing and turned on the power. A quick jab at the surface of the water was enough. Willy would suffer no more. Eli Blair went and sat at his desk.

The brief episode with the fish affected him deeply. Somehow it brought back the world he had almost discarded in his grief. He might laugh about the miracle later. But now there was something to do. Dying was too easy—killing Willy had made him realize it. Dying was not the New Way.

A few taps on the keyboard brought a face on the screen. An Old face. Joseph Parsons had not changed in seven months. "Hello, Eli," he said. "I've been waiting for you to call. The registrar at the hospital called me a while ago. You know how sorry I am."

Eli was lost for words for a moment. Then he said, "Thank you, Joseph. Look, I know this will sound harsh, but . . ."

"Eli, don't torture yourself. Go to bed, and I'll be round with the papers tomorrow morning."

Eli Blair couldn't stop the wry smile. "You knew I'd call you, didn't you?"

Joseph nodded wisely. "Of course I did. Once you've been a guardian, you can't shake it off. You've been a guardian five times. You ought to know by now . . ."

"Yes," sighed Eli, "I suppose I ought."

A beautiful, touching story, and at the same time earthy enough—think of the corrupt peddler tampering with an expiration date—and pâté at that. But one must be careful in considering science fiction, careful not to substitute happy imaginings for the concern demanded by most-probable-case reality.

Is offering an optimistic, utopian story such as this perhaps too dangerously palliative? Is it possible that mankind can survive the next all-out war? Writers other than Holkham have imagined not—remember Dr. Strangelove and On the Beach. And if survival is possible, won't conditions be a lot more likely to duplicate those in Robert Silverberg's "The Palace at Midnight" (see page 56), where post-catastrophe society is Balkanized, blighted, and boring?

However, a truly positive thought is engendered by Holkham's piece: If only mankind could radically change without first going to the brink of destruction or experiencing some horror such as Holkham's "industrial counterrevolution." Given the grim time we live in, the fact that we can speculate about such a bright future through the medium of stories like "New Is Beautiful" is one of the grand attributes of the science-fiction form—grander still if we would act in the spirit of Holkham's vision.

A ROBERT SILVERBERG CELEBRATION

Basileus," the story that follows, was written especially for this volume . . . and in short order at that. Contacted at summer's end in California, where he was engrossed with the writing of a novel, Silverberg had "Basileus" in *Omni's* New York office by early fall. For such a prodigious writer (hundreds of stories and books) it is to be expected that he could work quickly and on several things at once, but what has long been equally astounding about the Silverberg method is the quality of writing that results—the scope of its imagination, the richness of its detail.

The reader will no doubt be amazed at the extent of the arcane knowledge concerning heavenly hosts. It is not a knowledge Silverberg acquired quickly to fulfill a writing commission. Rather, he says, he has long been fascinated with esoteric subjects and even has written scholarly volumes on medieval lore. That he combines this interest with a very timely concern about Armageddon makes for fascinating, frightening science fiction.

"The Soul Painter and the Shapeshifter," reprinted from *Omni*, is a charming romance of another time and place. It involves two disparate beings who, notwithstanding their altogether awesome capabilities, are quite human in their needs, desires, sensibilities and frailties. The plot moves effortlessly and suspensefully, reminding us along the way that beauty is subjective, all-conquering, and the companion of love.

One of Silverberg's bleaker visions prevails in "The Palace at Midnight" a story set in California some years after a collapse of civilization. More specifically, it takes place in the Empire of San Francisco, for the United States is no longer an intact nation but a hodgepodge of tiny city-states, many of which are ruled by petty despots. Against this grim backdrop, the author adeptly stages an interlude of developing friendship between a man and a woman, which affords the reader a deepfelt awareness of the human condition amid widespread devastation and decadence. As the hero remarks, "Poor everybody."

*Enoch had become
an angel, and so had Elijah
and John the Baptist . . .
so why not Dan Cunningham
of Palo Alto, California?*

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

BASILEUS

PAINTING BY ROWENA MORRILL



In the shimmering lemon-yellow October light, Cunningham touches the keys of his terminal and summons angels. An instant to load the program, an instant to bring the file up, and there they are ready to spout from the screen at his command: Apollyon, Anael, Uriel, and all the rest. Uriel is the angel of thunder and terror, Apollyon is the Destroyer, the angel of the bottomless pit. Anael is the angel of bankers and commission brokers. Cunningham is fascinated by the multifarious duties and tasks, both exalted and humble, that are assigned to the angels. "Every visible thing in the world is put under the charge of an angel," said St. Augustine in *The Eight Questions*.

Cunningham has 1,114 angels in his computer now. He adds a few more each night, though he knows that he has a long way to go before he has them all. In the fourteenth century the number of angels was reckoned by the Kabbalists, with some precision, at 301,655,722. Albertus Magnus had earlier calculated that each choir of angels held 6,666 legions, and each legion 6,666 angels; even without knowing the number of choirs, one can see that that produces rather a higher total. And in the Talmud, Rabbi Jochanan proposed that new angels are born "with every utterance that goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He."

If Rabbi Jochanan is correct, the number of angels is infinite. Cunningham's personal computer, though it has extraordinary add-on memory capacity and is capable, if he chooses, of tapping into the huge mainframe machines of the Defense Department, has no very practical way of handling an infinity. But he is doing his best. To have 1,114 angels online already, after only eight months of part-time programming, is no small achievement.

One of his favorites of the moment is Harahel, the angel of archives, libraries, and rare cabinets. Cunningham has designated Harahel also the angel of computers: it seems appropriate. He invokes Harahel often, to discuss the evolving niceties of data processing with him. But he has many other favorites, and his tastes run somewhat to the sinister: Azrael, the angel of death, for example, and Arioch, the angel of vengeance, and Zebuleon, one of the nine angels who will govern at the end of the world. It is Cunningham's job, from eight to four every working day, to devise programs for the interception of incoming Soviet nuclear warheads, and that

perhaps, has inclined him toward the more apocalyptic members of the angelic host.

He invokes Harahel now. He has bad news for him. The invocation that he uses is a standard one that he found in Arthur Edward Waite's *The Lemegeton, or The Lesser Key of Solomon*, and he has dedicated one of his function keys to its text, so that a single keystroke suffices to read it. "I do invoke, conjure, and command thee, O thou Spirit N, to appear and to show thyself visibly unto me before this Circle, in fair and comely shape," is the way it begins, and it proceeds to utilize various secret and potent names of God in the summoning of Spirit N—such names as Zabaoth and Elion and, of course, Adonai—and it concludes, "I do potentially exorcise thee that thou appearest here to fulfill my will in all things which seem good unto me. Wherefore, come thou, visibly, peaceably and affably, now, without delay, to manifest that which I desire, speaking with a clear and perfect voice, intelligibly, and to mine understanding." All that takes but a microsecond, and another moment to read in the name of Harahel as Spirit N, and there the angel is on the screen.

"I am here at your summons," he announces expectantly.

Cunningham works with his angels from five to seven every evening. Then he has dinner. He lives alone, in a neat little flat a few blocks west of the Bayshore Freeway, and does not spend much of his time socializing. He thinks of himself as a pleasant man, a sociable man, and he may very well be right about that, but the pattern of his life has been a solitary one. He is thirty-seven years old, five feet eleven, with red hair, pale blue eyes, and a light dusting of freckles on his cheeks. He did his undergraduate work at Cal Tech, his postgraduate studies at Stanford, and for the last nine years he has been involved in ultra-sensitive military-computer projects in northern California. He has never married. Sometimes he works with his angels again after dinner, from eight to ten, but hardly ever any later than that. At ten he goes to bed. He is a very methodical person.

He has given Harahel the physical form of his own first computer, a little Radio Shack TRS-80, with wings flanking the screen. He had thought originally to make the appearance of his angels more abstract, showing Harahel as a sheaf of kilobytes, for example—but like many of Cunning-

ham's best and most austere ideas, it had turned out impractical in the execution, since abstract concepts did not translate well into graphics for him.

"I want to notify you," Cunningham says, "of a shift in jurisdiction." He speaks English with his angels. He has it on good though apocryphal authority that the primary language of the angels is Hebrew, but his computer's and old algorithms have no Hebrew capacity, nor does Cunningham. But they speak English readily enough with him: they have no choice. "From now on," Cunningham tells Harahel, "your domain is limited to hardware only."

Angry green lines rapidly cross and recross Harahel's screen. "By whose authority do you—"

"It isn't a question of authority," Cunningham replies smoothly. "It's a question of precision. I've just read Vretil into the data base, and I have to code his functions. He's the recording angel, after all. So, to some degree then he overlaps your territory."

"Ah," says Harahel, sounding melancholy. "I was hoping you wouldn't bother about him."

"How can I overlook such an important angel? Scribe of the knowledge of the Most High," according to the Book of Enoch, "Keeper of the heavenly books and records." "Quicker in wisdom than the other archangels."

"If he's so quick," says Harahel sullenly, "give him the hardware. That's what governs the response time, you know."

"I understand. But he maintains the lists. That's data base."

"And where does the data base live? The hardware?"

"Listen, this isn't easy for me," Cunningham says. "But I have to be fair. I know you'll agree that some division of responsibilities is in order. And I'm giving him all data bases and related software. You keep the rest."

"Screens. Terminals. CPUs. Big deal."

"But without you, he's nothing. Harahel. Anyway, you've always been in charge of cabinets, haven't you?"

"And archives and libraries," the angel says. "Don't forget that."

"I'm not. But what's a library? Is it the books and shelves and stacks, or the words on the pages? We have to distinguish the container from the thing contained."

"A grammarian," Harahel sighs. "A hairsplitter. A casuist."

"Look, Vretil wants the hardware, too. But

he's willing to compromise. Are you?"

"You start to sound less and less like our programmer and more and more like the Almighty every day," says Harahe.

"Don't blaspheme," Cunningham tells him. "Please, is it agreed? Hardware only?"

"You win," says the angel. "But you always do, naturally."

Naturally, Cunningham is the one with his hands on the keyboard, controlling things. The angels, though they are eloquent enough and have distinct and passionate personalities, are mere magnetic impulses deep within. In any contest with Cunningham they don't stand a chance. Cunningham, though he tries always to play the game by the rules, knows that, and so do they.

It makes him uncomfortable to think about it, but the role he plays is definitely godlike in all essential ways. He puts the angels into the computer; he gives them their tasks, their personalities, and their physical appearances; he summons them or leaves them uncalled, as he wishes.

A godlike role, yes. But Cunningham resists confronting that notion. He does not believe he is trying to be God; he does not even want to think about God. His family had been on comfortable terms with God—Uncle Tim was a priest, there was an archbishop somewhere back a few generations, his parents and sisters moved cozily within the divine presence as within a warm bath—but he himself, unable to quantify the Godhead, preferred to sidestep any thought of it. There were other, more immediate matters to engage his concern. His mother had wanted him to go into the priesthood, of all things, but Cunningham had averted that by demonstrating so visible and virtuosic a skill at mathematics that even she could see he was destined for science. Then she had prayed for a Nobel Prize in physics for him; but he had preferred computer technology. "Well," she said, "a Nobel in computers. I ask the Virgin daily."

"There's no Nobel in computers, Mom," he told her. But he suspects she still offers novenas for it.

The angel project had begun as a lark, but had escalated swiftly into an obsession. He was reading Gustav Davidson's old *Dictionary of Angels*, and when he came upon the description of the angel Adramelech, who had rebelled with Satan and had been cast from heaven, Cunningham thought it might be amusing to build a

computer simulation and talk with him. Davidson said that Adramelech was sometimes shown as a winged and bearded lion and sometimes as a mule with feathers, and sometimes as a peacock, and that one poet had described him as "the enemy of God, greater in malice, guile, ambition, and mischief than Satan, a fiend more curst, a deeper hypocrite." That was appealing. Well, why not build him? The graphics were easy—Cunningham chose the winged-lion form—but getting the personality constructed involved a month of intense labor and some consultations with the artificial-intelligence people over at Kestrel Institute. But finally Adramelech was on line, suave and diabolical, talking amiably of his days as an Assyrian god and his conversations with Beelzebub, who had named him Chancellor of the Order of the Fly (Grand Cross).

Next, Cunningham did Asmodeus, another fallen angel, said to be the inventor of dancing, gambling, music, drama, French fashions, and other frivolities. Cunningham made him look like a very dashing Beverly Hills Iranian, with a pair of tiny wings at his collar. It was Asmodeus who suggested that Cunningham continue the project; so he brought Gabriel and Raphael on line to provide some balance between good and evil, and then Forcas, the angel who renders people invisible, restores lost property, and teaches logic and rhetoric in Hell; and by that time Cunningham was hooked.

He surrounded himself with arcane lore: M. R. James's editions of the Apocrypha, Waite's *Book of Ceremonial Magic* and *Holy Kabbalah*, the *Mystical Theology and Celestial Hierarchies* of Dionysus the Areopagite, and dozens of related works that he called up from the Stanford data base in a kind of manic fervor. As he codified his systems, he became able to put in five, eight, a dozen angels a night; one June evening, staying up well past his usual time, he managed thirty-seven. As the population grew, it took on weight and substance, for one angel cross-filed another, and they behaved now as though they held long conversations with one another even when Cunningham was occupied elsewhere.

The question of actual belief in angels, like that of belief in God Himself, never arose in him. His project was purely a technical challenge, not a theological exploration. Once, at lunch, he told a co-worker what he was doing, and got a chilly blank stare. "Angels? Angels? Flying around with big

flapping wings, passing miracles? You aren't seriously telling me that you believe in angels, are you, Dan?"

To which Cunningham replied, "You don't have to believe in angels to make use of them. I'm not always sure I believe in electrons and protons. I know I've never seen any. But I make use of them."

"And what use do you make of angels?"

But Cunningham had lost interest in the discussion.

He divides his evenings between calling up his angels for conversations and programming additional ones into his pantheon. That requires continuous intensive research, for the literature of angels is extraordinarily large, and he is thorough in everything he does. The research is time-consuming, for he wants his angels to meet every scholarly test of authenticity. He pores constantly over such works as Ginzberg's seven-volume *Legends of the Jews*, Clement of Alexandria's *Prophetic Eclogues*, Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*.

It is the early part of the evening. He brings up Hagith, ruler of the planet Venus and commander of 4,000 legions of spirits, and asks him details of the transmutation of metals, which is Hagith's specialty. He summons Hadraniel, who in Kabbalistic lore is a porter at the second gate of Heaven, and whose voice, when he proclaims the will of the Lord, penetrates through 200,000 universes; he questions the angel about his meeting with Moses, who uttered the Supreme Name at him and made him tremble. And then Cunningham sends for Israfil the four-winged, whose feet are under the seventh earth and whose head reaches to the pillars of the divine throne. It will be Israfil's task to blow the trumpet that announces the arrival of the Day of Judgment. Cunningham asks him to take a few trial riffs now—"just for practice," he says, but Israfil declines, saying he cannot touch his instrument until he receives the signal, and the command sequence for that, says the angel, is nowhere to be found in the software Cunningham has thus far constructed.

When he wearies of talking with the angels, Cunningham begins the evening's programming. By now the algorithms are second nature and he can enter angels into the computer in a matter of minutes, once he has done the research. This evening he inserts nine more. Then he opens a beer, sits back, and lets the day wind down to its close.

He thinks he understands why he has become so intensely involved with this enterprise. It is because he must contend each day in his daily work with matters of terrifying apocalyptic import: nothing less, indeed, than the impending destruction of the world. Cunningham works routinely with megadeath simulation. For six hours a day he sets up hypothetical situations in which Country A goes into a alert mode, expecting an attack from Country B, which thereupon begins to suspect a preemptive strike and commences a defensive response, which leads Country A to escalate its own readiness, and so on until the bombs are in the air. He is aware, as are many thoughtful people both in Country A and Country B, that the possibility of computer-generated misinformation leading to a nuclear holocaust increases each year, as the time-window for correcting a malfunction diminishes. Cunningham also knows something that very few others do, or perhaps no one else at all: that it is now possible to send a signal to the giant computers — to theirs or ours, it makes no difference — that will be indistinguishable from the impulses that an actual flight of airborne warhead-bearing missiles would generate: if such a signal is permitted to enter the system, a minimum of eleven minutes, at the present time, will be needed to carry out fail-safe determination of its authenticity. That, at the present time, is too long to wait to decide whether the incoming missiles are real: a much swifter response is required.

Cunningham, when he designed his missile-simulating signal, thought at once of erasing his work. But he could not bring himself to do that: the program was too elegant, too perfect. On the other hand, he was afraid to tell anyone about it, for fear that it would be taken beyond his level of classification at once, and sealed away from him. He does not want that, for he dreams of finding an antidote for it, some sort of resonating inquiry mode that will distinguish all true alarms from false. When he has it, if he ever does, he will present both modes, in a single package, to Defense. Meanwhile, he bears the burden of suppressing a concept of overwhelming strategic importance. He has never done anything like that before. And he does not delude himself into thinking his mind is unique: if he could devise something like this, someone else probably could do it also, perhaps someone on the other side. True, it is a useless suicidal program. But it would not be the first suicidal program

to be devised in the interests of military security.

He knows he must take his simulator to his superiors before much more time goes by. And under the strain of that knowledge, he is beginning to show distinct signs of erosion. He mingles less and less with other people: he has unpleasant dreams and occasional periods of insomnia; he has lost his appetite and looks gaunt and haggard. The angel project is his only useful diversion, his chief distraction, his one avenue of escape.

For all his scrupulous scholarship, Cunningham has not hesitated to invent a few angels of his own. Uraniel is one of his: the angel of radioactive decay, with a face of whirling electron-shells. And he has coined Dimitrion, too: the angel of Russian literature, whose wings are sleighs and whose head is a snow-covered samovar. Cunningham fees no guilt over such whimsies. It is his computer after all, and his program. And he knows he is not the first to concoct angels. Blake engendered platoons of them in his poems. Urizen and Orc and Enitharmon and more. Milton he suspects populated *Paradise Lost* with dozens of sprites of his own invention. Gurdjieff and Alastair Crowley and even Pope Gregory the Great had their turns at amplifying the angelic roster: why then not also Dan Cunningham of Palo Alto, California? So from time to time he works one up on his own. His most recent is the dread high lord Basileus, to whom Cunningham has given the title of Emperor of the Angels. Basileus is still incomplete: Cunningham has not arrived at his physical appearance, nor his specific functions: other than to make him the chief administrator of the angelic horde. But there is something unsatisfactory about imagining a new archangel when Gabriel, Raphael and Michael already constitute the high command. Basileus needs more work. Cunningham puts him aside and begins to key in Duma, the angel of silence and of the stillness of death, thousand-eyed, armed with a fiery rod. His style in angels is getting darker and darker.

On a misty, rainy night in late October, a woman from San Francisco whom he knows in a distant, occasional way phones to invite him to a party. Her name is Joanna; she is in her mid-thirties, a biologist working for one of the little gene-splicing outfits in Berkeley; Cunningham had had a brief

and vague affair with her five or six years back, when she was at Stanford, and since then they have kept fitfully in touch, with long intervals elapsing between meetings. He has not seen her or heard from her in over a year. "It's going to be an interesting bunch," she tells him. "A futurologist from New York, Thomson the sociobiology man, a couple of video poets, and someone from the chimpanzee-language outfit and forget the rest, but they all sounded first rate."

Cunningham hates parties. They bore and jangle him. No matter how first rate the people are, he thinks, real interchange of ideas is impossible in a large random group, and the best one can hope for is some pleasant low-level chatter. He would rather be alone with his angels than waste an evening that way.

On the other hand, it has been so long since he has done anything of a social nature that he has trouble remembering what the last gathering was. As he had been telling himself all his life he needs to get out more often. He likes Joanna and it's about time they got together, he thinks, and he fears that if he turns her down, she may not call again for years. And the gentle patter of the rain, coming on this mid-evening after the long dry months of summer, has left him feeling uncharacteristically relaxed, open, accessible.

"All right," he says. "I'll be glad to go."

The party is in San Mateo, on Saturday night. He takes down the address. They arrange to meet there. Perhaps she'll come home with him afterward, he thinks: San Mateo is only fifteen minutes from his house, and she'll have a much longer drive back up to San Francisco. The thought surprises him. He had supposed he had lost all interest in her that way, he had supposed he had lost all interest in anyone that way, as a matter of fact.

Three days before the party, he decides to call Joanna and cancel. The idea of mingling about in a roomful of strangers appalls him. He can't imagine, now, why he ever agreed to go. Better to stay home alone and pass a long rainy night designing angels and conversing with Uriel, Ithuriel, Raphael, Gabriel.

But as he goes toward the telephone, that renewed hunger for solitude vanishes as swiftly as it came. He does want to go to the party. He does want to see Joanna very much, indeed. It startles him to realize that he positively yearns for some change in his rigid routine, some escape from his

little apartment, its elaborate computer hookup even ts angels

Cunningham imagines himself at the party in some brightly lit room in a handsome redwood-and-glass house perched in the hills above San Mateo. He stands with his back to the vast sparkling wrap-around window, a drink in his hand, and he is holding forth, dominating the conversation, sharing his rich stock of angel lore with a fascinated audience.

"Yes, 300 million of them," he is saying "and each with his fixed function. Angels don't have free will, you know. It's Church doctrine that they're created with it, but at the moment of their birth, they're given the choice of opting for God or against Him, and the choice is irrevocable. Once they've made it, they're unalterably fixed, for good or for evil. Oh, and angels are born circumcised too. At least the Angels of Sanctification and the Angels of Glory are, and maybe the seventy Angels of the Presence."

Does that mean that all angels are male?" asks a slender dark-haired woman.

"Strictly speaking, they're bodiless and therefore without sex," Cunningham tells her. "But in fact, the religions that believe in angels are mainly patriarchal ones, and when the angels are visualized, they tend

to be portrayed as men. Although some of them apparently can change sex at will. Milton tells us that in *Paradise Lost* Spirits when they please can either sex assume, or both, so soft and uncompounded is their essence pure." And some angels seem to be envisioned as female in the first place. There's the Shekinah, for instance, 'the bride of God,' the manifestation of His glory indwelling in human beings. There's Sophia, the angel of wisdom. And Lilith, Adam's first wife, the demon of lust—"

"Are demons considered angels, then?" a tall professorial-looking man wants to know.

"Of course. They're the angels who opted away from God. But they're angels nevertheless, even if we mortals perceive their aspects as demonic or diabolical."

He goes on and on. They all listen as though he is God's own messenger. He speaks of the hierarchies of angels—the seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, principalities, powers, virtues, archangels, and angels—and he tells them of the various lists of the seven great angels which differ so greatly once one gets beyond Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, and he speaks of the 90,000 angels of destruction and the 300 angels of light, he con-

cludes up the seven angels with seven trumpets from the Book of Revelation, he tells them which angels rule the seven days of the week and which the hours of the days and nights, he pours forth the wondrous angelic names, Zadkiel, Hashmal, Orphaniel, Jehudiel, Phaleg, Zagzagel. There is no end to it. He is in his glory. He is a fount of arcana. Then, the manic mood passes. He is alone in his room; there is no eager audience. Once again he thinks he will skip the party. No, No. He will go. He wants to see Joanna.

He goes to his terminal and calls up two final angels before bedtime: Leviathan and Behemoth. Behemoth is the great hippopotamus-angel, the vast beast of darkness, the angel of chaos. Leviathan is his mate, the mighty she-whale, the splendid sea serpent. They dance for him on the screen. Behemoth's huge mouth yawns wide. Leviathan gapes even more awesomely. "We are getting hungry," they tell him. "When is feeding time?" In rabbinical lore, these two will swallow all the damned souls at the end of days. Cunningham tosses them some electronic sardines and sends them away. As he closes his eyes, he invokes Poteh, the angel of oblivion, and falls into a black dreamless sleep.



"Of course I'm listening to you, Harriet. You said you were a Martian."

At his desk the next morning, he is at work on a standard item, a glitch-clearing program for the third-quadrant surveillance satellites, when he finds himself unaccountably trembling. That has never happened to him before. His fingernails look almost white, his wrists are rigid, his hands are quivering. He feels chilled. It is as though he has not slept for days. In the washroom he clings to the sink and stares at his pallid, sweaty face. Someone comes up behind him and says, "You all right, Dan?"

"Yeah. Just a little attack of the damn queasies."

"All that wild living in the middle of the week wears a man down," the other says, and moves along. The social necessities have been observed, a question, a non-committal answer, a quip, goodbye. He could have been having a stroke here and they would have played it the same way. Cunningham has no close friends at the office. He knows that they regard him as eccentric—eccentric in the wrong way, not lively and quirky but just a peculiar kind of hermit—and getting worse all the time. I could destroy the world, he thinks. I could go into the Big Room and type for fifteen seconds, and we'd be on all-out alert a minute later and the bombs would be coming down from orbit six minutes later. I could give that signal. I could really do it. I could do it right now.

Waves of nausea sweep him and he grips the edge of the sink until the last racking spasm is over. Then he cleans his face and, calmer now, returns to his desk to stare at the little green symbols on the screen.

That evening, still trying to find a function for Basileus, Cunningham discovers himself thinking of demons and of one demon not in the classical demonology—Maxwell's Demon, the one that the physicist James Clerk Maxwell postulated to send fast-moving molecules in one direction and slow ones in another, thereby providing an ultra-efficient method for heating and refrigeration. Perhaps some sort of filtering role could be devised for Basileus. Last week a few of the loftier angels had been complaining about the proximity to them of certain fallen angels within the computer. "There's a smell of brimstone on this disk that I don't like," Gabriel had said. Cunningham wonders if he could make Basileus a kind of traffic manager within the program: let him sit in there and ship the celestial angels into one sector of a

disk, the fallen ones to another.

The idea appeals to him for about thirty seconds. Then he sees how fundamentally trivial it is. He doesn't need an angel for a job like that; a little simple software could do it. Cunningham's corollary to Kant's categorical imperative. *Never use an angel as mere software.* He smiles, possibly for the first time all week. Why, he doesn't even need software. He can handle it himself, simply by assigning princes of Heaven to one file and demons to a different one. It hadn't seemed necessary to segregate his angels that way, or he would have done it from the start. But since now they were complaining—

He begins to flange up a sorting program to separate the files. It should have taken him a few minutes, but he finds himself working in a rambling, muddled way, doing an untypically sloppy job. With a quick swipe, he erases what he has done. Gabriel would have to put up with the reek of brimstone a little longer, he thinks.

There is a dull throbbing pain just behind his eyes. His throat is dry, his lips feel parched. Basileus would have to wait a little longer, too. Cunningham keys up another angel, allowing his fingers to choose for him, and finds himself looking at a blank-faced angel with a gleaming metal skin. One of the early ones, Cunningham realizes. "I don't remember your name," he says. "Who are you?"

"I am Anaphaxeton."

"And your function?"

"When my name is pronounced aloud, I will cause the angels to summon the entire universe before the bar of justice on Judgment Day."

"Oh, Jesus," Cunningham says. "I don't want you tonight."

He sends Anaphaxeton away and finds himself with the dark angel Apollyon, fish-scales, dragon-wings, bear-feet, breathing fire and smoke, holding the key to the Abyss. "No," Cunningham says, and brings up Michael, standing with drawn sword over Jerusalem, and sends him away only to find on the screen an angel with 70,000 feet and 4,000 wings, who is Azrael, the angel of death. "No," says Cunningham again. "Not you. Oh, Christ!" A vengeful army crowds his computer. On his screen there passes a flurrying regiment of wings and eyes and beaks. He shivers and shuts the system down for the night. Jesus, he thinks. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. All night long, suns explode in his brain.

On Friday his supervisor, Ned Harris

saunters to his desk in an unusually folksy way and asks if he's going to be doing anything interesting this weekend. Cunningham shrugs. "A party Saturday night, that's about all. Why?"

"Thought you might be going off on a fishing trip or something. Looks like the last nice weekend before the rainy season sets in, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not a fisherman, Ned."

"Take some kind of trip. Drive down to Monterey, maybe. Or up into the wine country."

"What are you getting at?"

"You look like you could use a little change of pace," Harris says amiably. "A couple of days off. You've been crunching numbers so hard, they're starting to crunch you, is my guess."

"It's that obvious?"

Harris nods. "You're tired, Dan. It shows. We're a little like air traffic controllers around here, you know, working so hard we start to dream about blips on the screen. That's no good. Get the hell out of town for a few. The Defense Department can operate without you for a while. Okay? Take Monday off, Tuesday even. I can't afford to have a fine mind like yours going goofy from fatigue, Dan."

"All right, Ned. Sure. Thanks."

His hands are shaking again. His fingernails are colorless.

"And get a good early start on the weekend, too. No need for you to hang around here today until four."

"If that's okay—"

"Go on. Shoo!"

Cunningham closes down his desk and makes his way uncertainly out of the building. The security guards wave at him. Everyone seems to know he's being sent home early. Is this what it's like to crack up on the job? He wanders about the parking lot for a little while, not sure where he has left his car. At last he finds it, and drives home at thirty miles an hour, with horns honking at him all the way as he wanders up the freeway.

He settles wearily in front of his computer and brings the system on line, calling for Harahel. Surely the angel of computers will not plague him with such apocalyptic matters.

Harahel says, "Well, we've worked out your Basileus problem for you."

"You have?"

"Uriel had the basic idea, building on your Maxwell's Demon notion. Israfael and Azrael developed it some. What's needed

is an angel embodying God's justice and God's mercy. A kind of evaluator, a filtering angel. He weighs deeds in the balance, and arrives at a verdict."

"What's new about that?" Cunningham asks. "Something like that's built into every mythology from Sumer and Egypt on. There's always a mechanism for evaluating the souls of the dead—this one goes to Paradise, this one goes to Hell—"

"Wait," Harahel says. "I wasn't finished. I'm not talking about the evaluation of individual souls."

"What then?"

"Worlds," the angel replies. Basileus will be the judge of worlds. He holds an entire planet up to scrutiny and decides whether it's time to call for the last trump."

Part of the machinery of Judgment, you mean?

Exactly. He's the one who presents the evidence to God and helps Him make His decision. And then he's the one who tells Israfe! to blow the trumpet, and he's the one who calls out the name of Anaphaxeton to bring everyone before the bar. He's the prime apocalyptic angel, the destroyer of worlds. And we thought you might make him look like—"

Ah," Cunningham says. "Not now. Let's talk about that some other time."

He shuts the system down, pours himself a drink, sits staring out the window at the big eucalyptus tree in the front yard. After a while it begins to rain. Not such a good weekend for a drive into the country after all, he thinks. He does not turn the computer on again that evening.

Despite everything, Cunningham goes to the party. Joanna's not there. She has phoned to cancel, late Saturday afternoon, pleading a bad cold. He detects no sound of a cold in her voice, but perhaps she is telling the truth. Or possibly she has found something better to do on Saturday night. But he is a ready-gear for party-going, and he is so tired, so eroded, that it is more effort to change his internal program than it is to follow through on the original schedule. So about eight that evening he drives up to San Mateo through a light drizzle.

The party turns out not to be in the glamorous hills west of town, but in a small cramped condominium, close to the heart of the city, furnished with what looks like somebody's college-era chairs and couches and bookshelves. A cheap stereo is playing the pop music of a dozen years

ago, and a sputtering screen provides a crude computer-generated light show. The host is some sort of marketing exec for a large video games company in San Jose, and most of the guests look vaguely corporate, too. The futurologist from New York has sent his regrets; the famous sociobiologist has also failed to arrive; the video poets are two San Francisco gays who will talk only to each other and stray not very far from the bar; the expert on teaching chimpanzees to speak is in the red-faced-and-sweaty stage of being drunk, and is working hard at seducing a plump woman festooned with astrological jewelry. Cunningham, numb, drifts through the party as though he is made of ectoplasm. He speaks to no one; no one speaks to him. Some jugs of red wine are open on a table by the window, and he pours himself a glassful. There he stands, immobile, imprisoned by inertia. He imagines himself suddenly making a speech about angels, telling everyone how Ithurie touched Satan with his spear in the Garden of Eden as the Fiend crouched next to Eve, and how the hierarchy Ataphiel keeps Heaven aloft by balancing it on three fingers. But he says nothing. After a time he finds himself approached by a lean, leathery-looking woman with glittering eyes, who says, "And what do you do?"

"I'm a programmer," Cunningham says. "Mainly I talk to angels. But I also do national security stuff."

"Angels?" she says, and laughs in a brittle, tinkling way. "You talk to angels? I've never heard anyone say that before." She pours herself a drink and moves quickly elsewhere.

"Angel's?" says the astrological woman. "Did someone say angels?"

Cunningham smiles and shrugs and looks out the window. It's raining harder. I should go home, he thinks. There's absolutely no point in being here. He fills his glass again. The chimpanzee man is still working on the astrologer, but she seems to be trying to get free of him and come over to Cunningham. To discuss angels with him? She is heavy-breasted, a little walled-eyed, sloppy-looking. He does not want to discuss angels with her. He does not want to discuss angels with anyone. He holds his pace at the window until it definitely does appear that the astrologer is heading his way; then he drifts toward the door. She says, "I heard you say you were interested in angels. Angels are a special field of mine, you know. I've studied with—"

"Angles," Cunningham says. "I play the angles. That's what I said. I'm a professional gambler."

"Wait," she says, but he moves past her and out into the night. It takes him a long while to find his key and get his car unlocked, and the rain soaks him to the skin, but that does not bother him. He is home a little before midnight.

He brings Raphael on line. The great archangel radiates a beautiful, golden glow.

"You will be Basileus," Raphael tells him. "We've decided it by a vote, hierarchy by hierarchy. Everyone agrees."

"I can't be an angel. I'm human," Cunningham replies.

"There's ample precedent. Enoch was carried off to Heaven and became an angel. So was Elijah. St. John the Baptist was actually an angel. You will become Basileus. We've already done the program for you. It's on the disk; just call him up and you'll see. Your own face, looking out at you."

"No," Cunningham says.

"How can you refuse?"

Are you really Raphael? You sound like someone from the other side. A tempter. Asmodeus. Astaroth. Belphegor.

"I am Raphael. And you are Basileus."

Cunningham considers it. He is so very tired that he can barely think.

An angel. Why not? A rainy Saturday night, a lousy party, a spitting headache, come home and find out you've been made an angel, and given a high place in the hierarchy. Why not? Why the hell not?

All right," he says. "I'm Basileus."

He puts his hands on the keys and taps out a simple formula on that goes straight down the pipe into the Defense Department's big Northern California system. With an alteration of two keystrokes, he sends the same message to the Soviets. Why not? Redundancy is the soul of security. The world now has about six minutes left. Cunningham has always been good with computers. He knows the secret language as few people before him have.

Then he brings Raphael on the screen again.

"You should see yourself as Basileus while there's still time," the archangel says.

"Yes. Of course. What's the access key?"

Raphael tells him. Cunningham begins to set it up.

Come now, Basileus! We are one!

Cunningham stares at the screen with growing wonder and delight, while the clock continues to tick.



THE SOUL PAINTER AND THE SHAPESHIFTER

An alien's deception provides an artist's muse

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

It was a surfeit of perfection that drove the soul painter Theron Nismile from the crystalline cities of Castle Mount to the dark forests of the western continent. All his life he had lived amid the wonders of the Mount, traveling through the Fifty Cities according to the demands of his career, exchanging one sort of splendor for another every few years. Dundumir was his native city—his first canvases were scenes of the Fiery Valley, tempestuous and passionate.

PAINTING BY CHARLES PFAHL

with the ragged energies of youth—and then he dwelled some years in marvelous Canzaine of the talking statues and afterward in Stee the awesome, whose outskirts were three days' journey across and in golden Halanx at the very fringes of the Castle and for five years at the Castle itself where he painted at the court of the Coronal Lord Thraym. His paintings were prized for their calm elegance and their perfection of form which mirrored the flawlessness of the Fifty Cities. But the beauty of such places numbs the soul after a time and paralyzes the artistic instincts. When Nismile reached his fortieth year he found himself beginning to identify perfection with stagnation: he loathed his famous works; his spirit began to cry out for upheaval, unpredictability, transformation.

The moment of crisis overtook him in the gardens of Tolingar Barrier. The Coronal had asked him for a suite of paintings of the gardens to decorate a pergola under construction on the Castle's rim.

Nismile was happy to oblige. He faced his blank canvas, drew breath deep down into his lungs, and readied himself for entering the trance state. In a moment his soul leaping from his dreaming mind would imprint the unique intensity of his vision on the psychosensitive fabric. He glanced at the genteel hills, the artful shrubbery, the delicately angled eaves, and a wave of rebellious fury crashed against him. And he quivered and shook and nearly fell. This immobile landscape, this static sterile beauty, this impeccable and matchless garden had no need of him. It was itself as unchanging as a painting and as lifeless. How ghastly! How hateful! Nismile swayed and pressed his hands to his pounding skull. He heard the soft surprised grunts of his companions and when he opened his eyes he saw them all staring in horror and embarrassment at the blackened and bubbling canvas. "Cover it!" he cried. Everyone was in motion at once, and in the center of the group Nismile stood statue-still. When he could speak again, he said, "Tell Lord Thraym I will be unable to fulfill his commission."

And so that day in Dundilmir he purchased what he needed and began his journey to the lowlands. He found passage on a pilgrim ship sailing to Piliplok on the continent of Zimroel—the entire interior of which was wilderness into which Lord Stiamot had driven the aboriginal Metamorphs after their final defeat four thousand years before.

Nismile expected the port of Piliplok to be a mudhole, but to his surprise it turned out to be an ancient and enormous city laid out according to a maddeningly rigid mathematical plan. It was ugly, but not in any refreshing way, and he moved on by riverboat up the Zimr. At a town called Verf he impulsively left the boat and set forth in a hired wagon into the forests to the south. When he had traveled so deep into the wilderness that he could see no trace of civilization, he halted and built a cabin beside a swift, dark stream. It was three years since he had left Castle Mount. Through all his journey he had been alone and had spoken to others only when necessary, and he had not painted at all.

Here Nismile began to heal. Everything in this place was unfamiliar and wonderful. On Castle Mount where the climate was artificially controlled, an endless sweet springtime reigned; the unreal air was clear and pure, and rainfall came at predictable times. But now he was in a rain forest, where the soil was spongy and yielding, clouds and tongues of fog often drifted by, showers were frequent, and the vegetation was a chaotic, tangled anarchy. It was as far removed as he could imagine from the symmetries of Tolingar Barrier. He wore little clothing, learned by trial and error what roots and berries and shoots were safe to eat, and devised a wickerwork weir to help him catch the slender crimson fish that flashed like skyrockets through the stream. He waded for hours through the dense jungle, savoring not only its strange beauty but also the tense pleasure of wondering whether he could find his way back to his cabin. Often he sang, in a loud, erratic voice, he had never sung on Castle Mount. Occasionally he started to prepare a canvas, but always he put it away unused. He composed nonsensical poems, voluptuous strings of syllables, and chanted them to an audience of slender, towering trees and incomprehensibly intertwined vines. Sometimes he thought back to the court of Lord Thraym, wondering whether the Coronal had hired a new artist to paint the decorations for the pergola, and whether the halatingas were now blooming along the road to High Morpin. But such thoughts came rarely.

He lost track of time. Four or five or perhaps six weeks—how could he tell?—went by before he saw his first Metamorph.

The encounter took place in a marshy meadow two miles upstream from his cabin. Nismile had gone there to gather the suc-

culent scarlet bulbs of mud-lilies, which he had learned to mash and roast into a sort of bread. They grew deep, and he dug them by working his arm to the shoulder into the muck and groping about with one cheek pressed to the ground. He came up muddy-faced and slippery, clutching a dripping handful, and was startled to find a figure calmly watching him from a distance of a dozen yards.

He had never seen a Metamorph. The native beings of Majipoor were perpetually exiled from the capital continent, Alhanroer, where Nismile had spent all his years. But he had an idea of how they looked, and he felt sure this must be one—an enormously tall, fragile, sallow-skinned being, sharp-faced, with inward-sloping eyes, a barely perceptible nose, and stringy, rubbery hair of a pale greenish hue. It wore only a leather loin harness. A short, sharp dirk of some polished black wood was strapped to its hip. In eerie dignity the Metamorph stood balanced with one frail, long leg twisted around the shin of the other. It seemed both sinister and gentle, menacing and comical. Nismile chose not to be alarmed.

"Hello," he said. "Do you mind if I gather bulbs here?"

The Metamorph was silent.

"I have the cabin down the stream," began Nismile. "I used to be a soul painter when I lived on Castle Mount."

The Metamorph regarded him so evenly. An unreadable expression flickered across its face. Then the Metamorph turned and slipped gracefully into the jungle, vanishing almost at once.

Nismile shrugged. He dug for more muddy bulbs.

A week or two later he met another Metamorph, or perhaps the same one, this time while he was stripping bark from a vine to make rope for a bilantoon trap. Once more the aborigine was wordless, materializing quietly like an apparition in front of Nismile and contemplating him from the same unsettling one-legged stance. A second time Nismile tried to draw the creature into conversation, but at his first words it drifted off, ghostlike. "Wait!" Nismile called. "I'd like to talk with you. I—" But he was alone.

A few days afterward he was collecting firewood and soon became aware that he was being studied. At once he said to the Metamorph, "I've caught a bilantoon, and I'm about to roast it. There's more meat than I need. Will you share my dinner?" The Metamorph smiled—he took that

enigmatic flicker for a smile, though it could have been anything—and as if by way of replying underwent a sudden astonishing shift, turning itself into a mirror image of Nismile, stocky and muscular, with dark, penetrating eyes and shoulder-length black hair. Nismile blinked wildly and trembled, then, recovering, he smiled, taking the mimicry as some form of communication, and said, "Marvelous! I can't begin to see how you people do it!" He beckoned.

"Come! It takes an hour and a half to cook the briar-roots, and we can talk until then. You understand our language, don't you?" It was bizarre beyond measure, this speaking to a duplicate of himself. "Say something, eh? Tell me: Is there a Metamorph village somewhere nearby? *Piurivar*," he corrected, remembering the Metamorphs' name for themselves. "Eh? A lot of *Piurivars* hereabouts, in the jungle?" Nismile gestured again. "Walk with me to my cabin and we'll get the fire going. You don't have any wine, do you? That's the only thing I miss, I think, some good strong wine, the heavy stuff they make in Mulde-mar. Won't taste that ever again, I guess, but there's wine in Zimroel, isn't there? Eh? Will you say something?" But the Metamorph responded only with a grimace, perhaps intended as a grin, that twisted the Nismile face into something harsh and strange; then it resumed its own form in an instant and with calm, floating strides started walking away.

Nismile hoped for a time that it would return with a flask of wine, but he did not see it again. *Curious creatures*, he thought. Were they angry that he was camped in their territory? Were they keeping him under surveillance out of fear that he was the vanguard of a wave of human settlers? Oddly, he felt himself in no danger. Metamorphs were generally considered to be malevolent; certainly they were disquieting beings, alien and unfathomable. Plenty of tales were told of Metamorph raids on outlying human settlements, and no doubt these Shapeshifter folk harbored bitter hatred for those who had come to their world and dispossessed them, driving them into the jungles. Nismile knew himself to be a man of goodwill, who had never done harm to others and wanted only to be left to live his life, and he fancied that some subtle sense would lead the Metamorphs to realize that he was not their enemy. He wished he could become their friend. He was growing hungry for conversation after his time of solitude and thought it might be

challenging and rewarding to exchange ideas with these strange folk. He might even paint one. He had been thinking of returning to his art, of experiencing that moment of creative ecstasy as his soul leaped the gap to the psychosensitive canvas and inscribed on it those images that he alone could fashion. Surely he was different now from the increasingly unhappy man he had been on Castle Mount, and that difference must show itself in his work. During the next few days he rehearsed speeches designed to win the confidence of the Metamorphs, to overcome that strange shyness of theirs that delicacy of bearing that blocked any sort of contact. In time, he thought, they would grow used to him; they would begin to speak, to accept his invitation to eat with him, and then perhaps they would pose—

But in the days that followed he saw no more Metamorphs. He roamed the forest, peering hopefully into thickets and down mist-swept lanes of trees, and found no one. He decided that he had been too forward and had frightened them away—so much for the malevolence of the monstrous Metamorphs!—and after a while he ceased to expect further contact. It was disturbing. He had not missed companionship when none seemed likely, but the knowledge that there were intelligent beings somewhere in the area kindled an awareness of loneliness in him that was not easy to bear.

One damp and warm day several weeks after his last Metamorph encounter, Nismile was swimming in the cool, deep pond formed by a natural dam of boulders half a mile below his cabin. He saw a pale slim figure moving quickly through a dense bower of blue-leaved bushes near the shore. He scrambled out of the water, barking his knees on the rocks. "Wait!" he shouted. "Please—don't be afraid—don't go—" The figure disappeared, but Nismile, thrashing frantically through the underbrush, caught sight of it again in a few minutes, leaning casually now against an enormous tree with vivid red bark.

Nismile stopped short, amazed, for the other was no Metamorph, but a human woman.

She was slender and young and naked, with thick, auburn hair, narrow shoulders, small, high breasts, and bright, playful eyes. She seemed altogether unafraid of him, a forest sprite who had obviously enjoyed leading him on this little chase. As he stood gaping at her, she looked him over unhur-

riedly and with an outburst of clear, tinkling laughter said, "You're all scratched and torn! Can't you run in the forest any better than that? You should take more care."

"I didn't want you to get away."

"Oh, I wasn't going to go far. You know, I was watching you for a long time before you noticed me. You're the man from the cabin, right?"

"Yes. And you—where do you live?"

"Here and there," she said airily.

He stared at her in wonder. Her beauty delighted him, and her shamelessness astounded him. *She might almost be a hallucination*, he thought. Where had she come from? What was a human being, naked and alone, doing in this primordial jungle?

Human?

Of course not, Nismile realized, with the sudden, sharp grief of a child who has been given some coveted treasure in a dream, only to wake aglow and perceive the sad reality. Remembering how effortlessly the Metamorph had mimicked him, Nismile comprehended the dismal probability: This was some prank, some masquerade. He studied her intently, seeking a sign of Metamorph identity, a flickering of the projection, a trace of knife-sharp cheekbones and sloping eyes behind the cheerfully impudent face. She was convincingly human in every degree. And yet—how implausible to meet one of his own kind here, how much more likely that she was a Shapeshifter, a deceiver—

He did not want to believe that. He resolved to meet the possibility of deception with a conscious act of faith in the hope that that would make her be what she seemed to be.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Sarise. And yours?"

"Nismile. Where do you live?"

"In the forest."

"Then there's a human settlement not far from here?"

She shrugged. "I live by myself." She came toward him. He felt his muscles growing taut as she moved closer, and his skin seemed to be blazing. She touched her fingers lightly to the cuts the vines had made on his arms and chest. "Don't those scratches bother you?"

"They're beginning to. I should wash them."

"Yes. Let's go back to the pool. I know a better way than the one you took. Follow me."

She parted the fronds of a thick clump of ferns and revealed a narrow, well-worn

trail. Gracefully she sprinted off, and he ran behind her, delighted by the ease of her movements, the play of muscles in her back and buttocks. He plunged into the pool a moment after she did. The chilly water soothed the stinging of the cuts. When they climbed out, he yearned to draw her to him and enclose her in his arms, but he did not dare. They sprawled on the mossy bank. There was mischief in her eyes.

He said, "My cabin isn't far."

"I know."

"Would you like to go there?"

"Some other time, Nismile."

"All right. Some other time."

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"I was born on Castle Mount. Do you know where that is? I was a soul painter at the Coronal's court. Do you know what soul painting is? It's done with the mind and a sensitive canvas, and—I could show you. I could paint you, Sarise. I take a close look at something, I seize its essence with my deepest consciousness, and then I go into a kind of trance, almost a waking dream, and I transform what I've seen into something of my own and hurl it on the canvas. I capture the truth of it in one quick blaze of transference—"

She scarcely seemed to have heard him.

"Would you like to touch me, Nismile?"

"Yes. Very much."

The thick turquoise moss was like a carpet. She rolled toward him, and his hand hovered above her body. He hesitated, for he was still certain that she was a Metamorph playing some perverse Shapeshifter game with him, and a heritage of thousands of years of dread and loathing surfaced in him. He was terrified of touching her and discovering that her skin had the clammy, repugnant texture that he imagined Metamorph skin to have, or that she would shift and turn into a creature of alien form the moment she was in his arms. Her eyes were closed, her lips were parted, her tongue flickered between them like a serpent's; she was waiting. In terror he forced his hand down to her breast. But her flesh was warm and yielding, and it felt very much the way the flesh of a young human woman should feel. With a soft, little cry she pressed herself into his embrace. For a dismaying instant the grotesque image of a Metamorph rose in his mind, angular and long-limbed and noseless, but he shoved the thought away fiercely and gave himself up entirely to her lithe and vigorous body.

For a long time afterward they lay still,

side by side, hands clasped, saying nothing. Even when a light rain shower came, they did not move but simply allowed the quick, sharp sprinkle to wash the sweat from their skins. He opened his eyes and found her watching him with keen curiosity.

"I want to paint you," he said.

"No."

"Not now. Tomorrow. You'll come to my cabin, and then I can—"

"No."

"I haven't tried to paint in years. It's important to me to begin again. And I want very much to paint you."

"I want very much not to be painted," she said.

"Please."

"No," she said gently. She rolled away and stood up. "Paint the jungle. Paint the pool. Don't paint me, all right, Nismile? All right?"

He made an unhappy gesture of acceptance.

She said, "I have to leave now."

"Will you tell me where you live?"

"I already have. Here and there. In the forest. Why do you ask these questions?"

"I want to be able to find you again. If you disappear, how will I know where to look?"

"I know where to find you," she said. "That's enough."

"Will you come to me tomorrow? To my cabin?"

"I think I will."

He took her hand and drew her toward him. But now she was hesitant, remote. The mystery surrounding her throbbed in his mind. She had told him nothing but her name. He found it too difficult to believe that she, like him, was a solitary of the jungle, wandering as the whim came, but he doubted that he could have failed to detect, in all these weeks, the existence of a human village nearby. The most likely explanation was that she was a Shapeshifter, embarked on an adventure with a human. Much as he resisted that idea, he was too rational to reject it completely. But she looked human, she felt human, she acted human. How adept were these Metamorphs at their transformations? He was tempted to ask her outright whether his suspicions were correct, but that was foolishness; she had answered nothing else, and surely she would not answer that. He kept his questions to himself. She gently pulled her hand free of his grasp and stepped toward the fern-bordered trail and was gone.

Nismile waited at his cabin all the next day. She did not come. It scarcely surprised him. Their meeting had been a dream, a fantasy, an interlude beyond time and space. He did not expect to see her again. Toward evening he drew a canvas from the pack he had brought with him and set it up, thinking he might paint the view from his cabin as twilight purpled the forest air. He studied the landscape a long while, testing the verticals of the slender trees against the heavy horizontal of a thick, sprawling yellow-berried bush, and eventually shook his head and put his canvas away. Nothing about this landscape needed to be captured by art. In the morning, he thought, he would hike upstream past the meadow to a place where fleshy, red succulents sprouted like rubbery spikes from a deep cleft in a great rock: a more promising scene, perhaps.

But in the morning he found excuses for delaying his departure, and by noon it seemed too late to go. He worked in his little garden plot instead—he had begun transplanting some of the shrubs whose fruits or greens he ate—and that occupied him for hours. In late afternoon a milky fog settled over the forest. He went inside, and a few minutes later there was a knock at the door.

"I had given up hope," he told her.

Sarise's forehead and brows were beaded with moisture. The fog, he thought, or maybe she had been dancing along the path. "I promised I'd come," she said softly.

"Yesterday."

This is yesterday," she said, laughing, and drew a flask from her robe. "You like wine? I found some of this. I had to go a long distance to get it. Yesterday."

It was a young gray wine, the kind that tickles the tongue with its sparkle. The flask had no label, but he supposed it to be some Zimroel wine, unknown on Castle Mount. They drank it all, he more than she—she filled his cup again and again—and when it was gone, they went outside to make love on the cool, damp ground beside the stream and fell into a doze afterward. She woke him in some small hour of the night and led him to his bed. They spent the rest of the night pressed close to each other, and the next morning she showed no desire to leave. They went to the pool to begin the day with a swim, they embraced again on the turquoise moss. She guided him to the gigantic red-barked tree where he had first seen her and pointed out to him a colossal yellow fruit, three or four yards across, that

had fallen from one of its enormous branches. Nismile looked at it doubtfully. It had split open and its interior was a scarlet, custardy stuff studded with huge, gleaming black seeds. "Dwikka," she said. "It will make us drunk." She stripped off her robe and used it to wrap great chunks of the dwikka fruit, which they carried back to his cabin and spent all morning eating. They sang and laughed most of the afternoon. For dinner they grilled some fish from Nismile's weir, and later, as they lay arm in arm watching the night descend, she asked him a thousand questions about his past life, his painting, his boyhood, his travels about Castle Mount, the Fifty Cities, the Sex Riders, the royal court of Lord Thraym, the royal Castle of Uncountable Rooms. The questions came from her in a torrent, the newest one rushing forth almost before he had dealt with the last. Her bubbling curiosity was inexhaustible.

"What will we do tomorrow?" she asked at long last.

So they became lovers. For the first few days they did little but eat and swim and embrace and devour the intoxicating fruit of the dwikka tree. He ceased to fear, as he had at the beginning, that she would disappear as suddenly as she had come to him. Her flood of questions subsided after a time, but even so he chose not to take his turn preferring to leave her mysteries unperced.

He could not shake his obsession with the idea that she was a Metamorph. The thought chilled him—that her beauty was a lie, that behind it she was a ren and grotesque—especially when he ran his hands over the cool, sweet smoothness of her thighs or breasts. He constantly had to fight away his suspicions. But they would not leave him. There were no human outposts in this part of Zimroe, and it was too implausible that this girl—for that was all she was—a girl—had elected to take up a hermit's life here. Far more likely, Nismile thought, that she was native to this place, one of the unknown numbers of Shapeshifters who slipped like phantoms through these humid groves. When she slept, he sometimes watched her by faint starlight to see whether she began to lose human form. Always she remained as she was and even so, he suspected her.

And yet, and yet, and yet it was not in the nature of Metamorphs to seek human company or to show warmth toward them. Humans had stolen this vast world of Majipoor from them—coming here thousands

of years ago, finding the Shapeshifters already in decline, the mighty stone cities in ruins, and finishing the job by appropriating their most fertile lands, sequestering them in ever smaller regions, defeating their last uprising in Lord Stamot's time and forcing them, ultimately, into the Zimroel forests, out of sight, out of mind. To most people of Majipoor the Metamorphs were ghosts of a former era, revenants, unreal, legendary. Why would one seek him out in his seclusion, offer itself to him in so convincing a counterfeit of love, strive with such zeal to brighten his days and enliven his nights? In a moment of paranoia he imagined Sarise reverting in the darkness to her true shape and rising above him as he slept to plunge a gleaming dirk into his throat in revenge for the crimes of his ancestors. But what folly such fantasies were! If the Metamorphs wanted to murder him, they needed no such elaborate charades.

It was almost as absurd to believe that she was a Metamorph as to believe that she was not.

To put these matters from his mind, he resolved to take up his art again. On an unusually clear and sunny day he set out with Sarise for the rock of the red succulents, carrying a raw canvas. She watched fascinated as he prepared everything.

"You do the painting entirely with your mind?" she asked.

"Entirely. I fix the scene in my soul, I transform and rearrange and heighten, and then—you see—"

"Is that right if I watch? I won't spoil it?"

"Of course not."

"But if someone else's mind gets into the painting—"

"It can't happen. The canvases are tuned to me." He squinted, made frames with his fingers, moved a few feet this way and that. His throat was dry and his hands were quivering. So many years since he had last done this. Would he still have the gift? And the technique? He aligned the canvas and touched it in a preliminary way with his mind. The scene was a good one, vivid, bizarre, the color contrasts powerful, ones the compositional aspects challenging: that massive rock, those weird, meaty red plants, the tiny yellow flowers bracts at their tips, the forest dappled sunlight. Yes, yes, it would work, it would amply serve as the vehicle through which he could convey the texture of this dense, tangled jungle, this place of shapeshifting—

He closed his eyes. He entered trance. He hurried the picture to the canvas.

Sarise uttered a small surprised cry.

Nismile felt sweat break out all over her. She staggered and fought for breath, after a moment he regained control and looked toward the canvas in front of him.

"How beautiful!" Sarise murmured.

But he was shaken by what he saw. Those dizzying diagonals, the blurred and streaked colors, the heavy greasy sky, hanging in sullen loops from the horizon—it looked nothing like the scene he had tried to capture, and far more troublesome, nothing like the work of Theron Nismile. It was a dark and anguished painting, corrupted by unintended discords.

"Don't you like it?" she asked.

"It isn't what I had in mind."

"Even so, how wonderful to make the picture come out on the canvas like that! And such a lovely thing!"

"You think it's lovely?"

"Yes, of course! Don't you?"

He stared at her. *This? Lovely? Was she flatterer him, or merely ignorant of prevailing tastes, or did she genuinely admire what he had done?* This strange, tormented painting, this somber and alien work—

Alien.

"You don't like it," she said. Not a question this time.

"I haven't painted in almost four years. Maybe I need to go about it slowly to get the way of it right again—"

"I spoiled your painting," Sarise said.

"You? Don't be silly."

"My mind got mixed into it. My way of seeing things."

"I told you that the canvases are tuned to me alone. I could be in the midst of a thousand people, and none of them would affect the painting."

"But perhaps I distracted you. I swerved your mind somehow."

"Nonsense."

"I'll go for a walk. Paint another one while I'm gone."

"No, Sarise. This one is splendid. The more I look at it the more pleased I am. Come. Let's go home. Let's swim and eat some dwikka and make love. Yes?"

He took the canvas from its mount and rolled it. But what she had said affected him more than he would admit. Some kind of strangeness had entered the painting, no doubt of it. What if she had managed somehow to taint it, her hidden Metamorph soul radiating its essence into his spirit, coloring the impulses of his mind with an alien hue?

They walked downstream in silence. When they reached the meadow of the mud-lies where Nismile had seen his first Metamorph, he heard himself blurt, "Sarise, I have to ask you something."

"Yes?"

He could not halt himself. "You aren't human, are you? You're really a Metamorph, right?"

She stared at him, wide-eyed, color rising in her cheeks.

"Are you serious?"

He nodded.

"Me a Metamorph?" She laughed, not very convincingly. "What a wild idea!"

Answer me, Sarise. Look into my eyes and answer me."

"It's too foolish, Therion."

"Please. Answer me."

"You want me to prove I'm human? How could I?"

I want you to tell me that you're human. Or that you're something else."

"I'm human," she said.

Can I believe that?"

"I don't know. Can you? I've given you your answer." Her eyes flashed with mirth. "Don't I feel human? Don't I act human? Do I seem like an imitation?"

"Perhaps I'm unable to tell."

"Why do you think I'm a Metamorph?"

"Because only Metamorphs live in this jungle," he said. "It seems—logical. Even though—" He faltered. "Look, I've had my answer. It was a stupid question and I'd like to drop the subject. All right?"

"How strange you are. You must be angry. You do think I spoiled your painting."

"That's not so."

"You're a very poor liar, Therion."

"All right. *Something* spoiled my painting. I don't know what. It wasn't the painting I intended."

"Paint another one then."

"I will. Let me paint you, Sarise."

"I told you I didn't want to be painted."

"I need to. I need to see what's in my own soul, and the only way I can know—"

"Paint the dwikka tree. Therion. Paint the cabin."

"Why not paint you?"

"The idea makes me uncomfortable."

"You aren't giving me a real answer. What is there about being painted that—"

"Please, Therion."

"Are you afraid I'll see you on the canvas in a way that you won't like? Is that it? That I'll get a different answer to my questions when I paint you?"

"Please."

"Let me paint you."

"No."

"Give me a reason then."

"I can't," she said.

"Then you can't refuse." He drew a canvas from his pack. "Here, in the meadow, now. Go on, Sarise. Stand beside the stream. I'll take on you a moment."

No, Therion.

If you love me, Sarise, let me paint you."

It was a clumsy bit of blackmail, and it shamed him to have attempted it. And it angered her, for he saw a harsh glitter in her eyes that he had never seen there before. They confronted each other for a tense moment.

Then she said in a cold, flat voice, "Not here, Therion. At the cabin. Let you paint me there if you insist."

Neither of them spoke on the way home.

He was tempted to forget the whole thing. It seemed to him that he had imposed his will by force, that he had committed a sort of rape, and he almost wished he could retreat from the position he had won. But there would never be any going back to the old easy harmony between them, and he had to have the answers he needed. Uneasily he set about preparing a canvas.

"Where shall I stand?" she asked.

Anywhere. By the stream. By the cabin."

In a slouching, slack-limbed way she moved toward the cabin. He nodded and d sprightly began the final steps before entering trance. Sarise glowered at him. Tears were wetting in her eyes.

"I love you," he cried abruptly, and went down into trance, and the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was Sarise altering her pose, coming out of her moody slouch, squaring her shoulders, eyes suddenly bright, smile flashing.

When he opened his eyes, the painting was done and Sarise was staring timidly at him from the cabin door.

"How is it?" she asked.

"Come. See for yourself."

She walked to his side. They examined the picture together, and after a moment Nismile slipped his arm around her shoulder. She shivered and moved closer to him.

The painting showed a woman with human eyes and Metamorph mouth and nose, against a jagged and chaotic background of clashing reds and oranges and pinks.

She said quietly, "Now do you know what you wanted to know?"

"Was I you in the meadow? And the two other times?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You interested me, Therion. I wanted to know all about you. I had never seen anything like you."

"I still don't believe it," he whispered.

She pointed toward the painting. "Believe it, Therion."

"No, No."

"You have your answer now."

"I know you're human. The painting lies."

No, Therion."

Prove it for me. Change for me. Change now." He released her and stepped a short way back. "Do it. Change for me."

She looked at him sadly. Then, without perceptible transition, she turned herself into a replica of him, as she had done once before the final proof, the unanswerable answer. A muscle quivered wildly in his cheek. He watched her, and she changed again, this time into something terrifying and monstrous, a nightmarish gray, pock-marked balloon of a thing with flabby skin and eyes like saucers and a hooked black beak, and from that she went to the Metamorph form, taller than he, hollow-chested and featureless, and then she was Sarise once more, cascades of auburn hair, delicate hands, strong thighs.

"No," he said. "Not that one. No more counterfeits."

She became the Metamorph again.

He nodded. "Yes. That's better. Stay that way. It's more beautiful."

"Beautiful, Therion?"

"I find you beautiful. Like this. As you really are. Deception is a wayside game."

He reached for her hand. It had six fingers, very long and narrow, without fingernails or visible joints. Her skin was silky and faintly glossy, and it felt not at all as he had expected. He ran his hands lightly over her slim, virtually fleshless body. She was altogether motionless.

"I should go now," she said at last.

"Stay with me. Live here with me."

"Even now?"

"Even now, in your true form."

"You still want me?"

"Very much," he said. "Will you stay?"

She said, "When I first came to you, it was to watch you, to study you, to play with you, perhaps even to mock and hurt you. You are the enemy, Therion. Your kind must always be the enemy. But as we began to live together, I saw there was no reason to hate you. Not you, you as a special individual, do you understand?"

It was the voice of Sarise coming from those alien lips. *How strange!* he thought.

How much like a dream!

She said "I began to want to be with you. To make the game go on forever. But the game had to end. And yet I still want to be with you."

"Then stay Sarise."

"Only if you truly want me."

"I've told you that."

"I don't horrify you?"

"No."

"Paint me again, Therion. Show me with a painting. Show me love on the canvas. Therion, and then I'll stay."

He painted her day after day until he had used every canvas, and hung them all about the interior of the cabin. Sarise and the dwikka tree. Sarise in the meadow. Sarise against the milky fog of evening. Sarise at twilight green against purple. There was no way he could prepare more canvases, although he tried. It did not really matter. They began to go on long voyages of exploration together, down one stream and another into distant parts of the forest, and she showed him new trees and flowers and the creatures of the jungle, the toothy lizards and the burrowing golden worms and the sinister, ponderous amorfbots sleeping away their days in muddy lakes. They said little to one another, the time for answer questions was over and words were no longer needed.

Day slipped into day, week into week, and in this land of no seasons it was difficult to measure the passing of time. Perhaps a month went by, perhaps six. They encountered no one else. The jungle was full of Metamorphs, she told him, but they were keeping their distance and she hoped they would leave them alone forever.

One afternoon of steady drizzle he went out to check his traps, and when he returned an hour later, he knew at once that something was wrong. As he approached the cabin, four Metamorphs emerged. He felt sure that one was Sarise, but he could not tell which one. "Wait!" he cried as they moved past him. He ran after them. "What do you want with her? Let her go. Sarise? Sarise? Who are they? What do they want?"

For just an instant one of the Metamorphs flickered, and he saw the girl with the auburn hair, but only for an instant, then there were four Metamorphs again, gliding like ghosts toward the depths of the jungle. The rain grew more intense, and a heavy fog bank drifted in, cutting off all visibility. Nismile paused at the edge of the clearing, straining desperately for sounds over the patter of the rain and the loud throb of the

stream. He imagined he heard weeping, he thought he heard a cry of pain, but it might have been any other sort of forest sound. There was no hope of following the Metamorphs into that impenetrable zone of thick white mist.

He never saw Sarise again, or any other Metamorph. For a while he hoped he would come upon Shapeshifters in the forest and be slain by them with their little poisoned dirks, for the loneliness was intolerable now. But that did not happen, and when it became obvious that he was living in a sort of quarantine, cut off not only from Sarise—if she was still alive—but from the entire society of the Metamorph folk, he found himself unable to dwell in the clearing beside the stream any longer. He rolled up his paintings of Sarise and carefully dismantled his cabin and began the long and perilous journey back to civilization.

It was a week before his fiftieth birthday when he reached the borders of Castle Mount. In his absence he discovered Lord Thraym had become Pontifex, and the new Corona was Lord Vildvar, a man of little sympathy for the arts. Nismile rented a studio on the riverbank at Stee and began to paint again. He worked only from memory, dark and disturbing scenes of jungle life

often showing Metamorphs lurking in the middle distance. It was not the sort of work likely to be popular on the cheerful and airy world of Majipoor, and Nismile found few buyers at first. But in time his paintings caught the fancy of the Duke of Qura'n, who had begun to weary of sunny serenity and perfect proportion. Under the Duke's patronage Nismile's work grew fashionable, and in the later years of his life there was a ready market for everything he produced.

He was widely imitated, though never successfully, and he was the subject of many critical essays and biographical studies. "Your paintings are so turbulent and strange," one scholar said to him. "Have you devised some method of working from dreams?"

"I work only from memory," said Nismile. "From painful memory. I would be so bold as to venture."

Not at all, answered Nismile. "A my work is intended to help me recapture a time of joy, a time of love, the happiest and most precious moment of my life." He stared past the questioner into distant mists, thick and soft as wool that swirled through clumps of tall, slender trees bound by a tangled network of vines.





*Her diplomatic mission
was a pretense to get inside
the Emperor's court*

THE PALACE AT MIDNIGHT

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

The foreign minister of the Empire of San Francisco was trying to sleep late. Last night had been a long one, a wild if not particularly gratifying party at the Baths, too much to drink, too much to smoke, and he had seen the dawn come up like thunder out of Oakland 'cross the Bay. Now the telephone was ringing. He integrated the first couple of rings nicely into his dream, but the next one began to undermine his slumber, and the one after that woke him up. He groped for the receiver and, eyes still closed, managed to croak, "Christensen here."

"Tom, are you awake? You don't sound awake. It's Morty, Tom. Wake up."

The undersecretary for external affairs, Christensen sat up, rubbed his eyes, ran his tongue around his lips. Daylight was streaming into the room. His cats were glaring at him from the doorway. The little Siamese pawed daintily at her empty bowl and looked

PAINTING BY JEAN-PIERRE ALAUX

up expectantly. The fat Persian just sat 'Tom?'

'I'm up! I'm up! What is it, Morty?'

"I didn't mean to wake you. How was supposed to know, one in the afternoon—"

"What is it, Morty?"

'We got a call from Monterey. There's an ambassador on the way up and you've got to meet with her.'

The foreign minister worked hard at clearing the fog from his brain. He was thirty-nine years old, and a l-night parties took more out of him than they once had.

"You do it, Morty."

"You know I would, Tom. But I can't. You've got to handle this one yourself. It's prime."

"Prime? What kind of prime? You mean, like a great dope deal? Or are they declaring war on us?"

"How would I know the details? The call came in, and they said it was prime. Ms. Sawyer must confer with Mr. Christensen. It wouldn't involve dope, Tom. And it can't be war, either. Shit, why would Monterey want to make war on us? They've only got ten soldiers, I bet, unless they're drafting the Chicanos out of the Salinas calabozo, and besides—"

"All right." Christensen's head was buzzing. "Go easy on the chatter. Okay? Where am I supposed to meet her?"

"In Berkeley."

"You're kidding."

"She won't come into the city. She thinks it's too dangerous over here."

"What do we do, kill ambassadors and barbecue them? She'll be safe here, and she knows it."

"Look, I talked to her. She thinks the city is too crazy. She'll come as far as Berkeley, but that's it."

"Tell her to go to hell."

"Tom, Tom—"

Christensen sighed. "Where in Berkeley will she be?"

"The Claremont, at half past four."

"Jesus," Christensen said. "How did you get me into this? All the way across to the East Bay to meet a lousy ambassador from Monterey! Let her come to San Francisco. This is the Empire, isn't it? They're only a stinking republic. Am I supposed to swim over to Oakland every time an envoy shows up and wiggles a finger? Some bozo from Fresno says boo, and I have to haul my ass out to the Valley, eh? Where does it stop? What kind of clout do I have, anyway?"

'Tom—'

"I'm sorry, Morty. I don't feel like a god-damned diplomat this morning."

"It isn't morning anymore, Tom. But I'd do it for you if I could."

"All right. All right. I didn't mean to yell at you. You make the ferry arrangements."

"Ferry leaves at three-thirty. Chauffeur will pick you up at three, okay?"

"Okay," Christensen said. "See if you can find out any more about all this and have somebody call me back in an hour with a briefing, will you?"

He fed the cat, showered, shaved, took a couple of pills, and brewed some coffee. At half past two the minister called. Nobody had any idea what the ambassador might want. Relations between San Francisco and the Republic of Monterey were cordial just now. Ms. Sawyer lived in Pacific Grove and was a member of the Monterey Senate, that was all that was known about her. *Some briefing*, he thought.

He went downstairs to wait for his chauffeur. It was a late autumn day, bright and clear and cool. The rains hadn't begun yet, and the streets looked dusty. The foreign minister lived on Frederick Street, just off Cole, in an old white Victorian with a small front porch. He settled in on the steps, feeling wide awake but surly, and a few minutes before three his car came putt-putting up, a venerable gray Chevrolet with the arms of imperial San Francisco on its doors. The driver was Vietnamese or maybe Thai. Christensen got in without a word, and off they went at an imperial velocity through the virtually empty streets down to Haight, eastward for a while, then onto Oak, up Van Ness, past the palace where at this moment the Emperor Norton VI was probably taking his imperial nap, and along Post and then Market to the ferry slip.

The stump of the Bay Bridge glittered magically against the sharp blue sky. A small power cruiser was waiting for him. Christensen was silent during the slow, dull voyage. A chill wind cut through the Golden Gate and made him huddle into himself. He stared broodingly at the low, rounded East Bay hills, dry and brown from a long summer of drought, and thought about the permutations of fate that had transformed an adequate architect into the barely competent foreign minister of this barely competent little nation. The Empire of San Francisco, one of the early empires had said, is the only country in history that was decadent from the day it was founded.

At the Berkeley marina Christensen told the ferry skipper, "I don't know what time I'll be coming back. So no sense waiting. I'll phone in when I'm ready to go."

Another imperial car took him up the hillside to the sprawling nineteenth century splendor of the Claremont Hotel, that vast, antiquated survivor of all the cataclysms. It was seedy now, the grounds a jungle, very almost to the tops of the palm trees, and yet it still looked fit to be a palace, with hundreds of rooms and magnificent banquet halls. Christensen wondered how often it had guests. There wasn't much tourism these days.

In the parking plaza outside the entrance was a single car, a black and-white California Highway Patrol job that had been decorated with the insignia of the Republic of Monterey, a contorted cypress tree and a sea otter. A uniformed driver lounged against it, looking bored. "I'm Christensen," he told the man.

"You the foreign minister?"

"I'm not the Emperor Norton."

"Come on. She's waiting in the bar."

Ms. Sawyer stood up as he entered—a slender, dark-haired woman of about thirty, with cool, green eyes—and he flashed her a quick, professionally cordial smile, which she returned just as professionally. He did not feel at all cordial.

"Senator Sawyer," he said. "I'm Tom Christensen."

"Glad to know you." She pivoted and gestured toward the huge picture window that ran the length of the bar. "I just got here. I've been admiring the view. It's been years since I've been in the Bay Area."

He nodded. From the cocktail lounge one could see the slopes of Berkeley, the bay, the ruined bridges, the still-imposing San Francisco skyline. Very nice. They took seats by the window, and he beckoned to a waiter, who brought them drinks.

"How was your drive up?" Christensen asked.

"No problems. We got stopped for speeding in San Jose, but I got out of it. They could see it was an official car, but they stopped us anyway."

"The lousy bastards. They love to look important."

"Things haven't been good between Monterey and San Jose all year. They're spoiling for trouble."

"I hadn't heard," Christensen said.

"We think they want to annex Santa Cruz. Naturally we can't put up with that. Santa Cruz is our buffer."

He asked sharply, "Is that what you came here for—to ask our help against San Jose?"

She stared at him in surprise. "Are you in a hurry, Mr. Christensen?"

'Not particularly.'

'You sound awfully impatient. We're still making preliminary conversation having a drink, two diplomats playing the diplomatic game. Isn't that so?'

'Well?'

'I was telling you what happened to me on the way north. In response to your question. Then I was filling you in on current political developments. I didn't expect you to snap at me like that.'

'Did I snap?'

'It certainly sounded like snapping to me,' she said with some annoyance.

Christensen took a deep pull of his bourbon-and-water and gave her a long, steady look. She met his gaze unperturbably. She looked composed, amused, and very very tough. After a time, when some of the red haze of irrational anger and fatigue had cleared from his mind, he said quietly, 'I had about four hours' sleep last night, and I wasn't expecting an envoy from Monterey today. I'm tired and edgy, and I sounded impatient or harsh or snappish. I'm sorry.'

'It's all right. I understand.'

'Another bourbon or two and I'll be properly unwound.' He held his empty glass toward the hovering waiter. 'A refill for you, too?' he asked her.

'Yes. Please.' In a formal tone she said, 'Is the Emperor in good health?'

'Not bad. He hasn't really been well for a couple of years, but he's holding his own. And President Morgan?'

'Fine,' she said. 'Hunting wild boar in Big Sur this week.'

A nice life it must be, President of Monterey. I've always liked Monterey. So much quieter and cleaner and more sensible down there than in San Francisco.

'Too quiet sometimes. I envy you the excitement here.'

'Yes, of course. The rapes, the muggings, the arson, the mass meetings, the race wars, the—'

'Please,' she said gently.

He realized he had begun to rant. There was a throbbing behind his eyes. He worked to gain control of himself.

'Did my voice get too loud?'

'You must be terribly tired. Look, we can confer in the morning, if you'd prefer. It isn't that urgent. Suppose we have dinner and not talk politics at all, and get rooms here, and tomorrow after breakfast we can—'

'No,' Christensen said. 'My nerves are a little ragged, that's all. But I'll try to be more civil. And I'd rather not wait until tomorrow to find out what this is all about.'

Suppose you give me a précis of it now, and if it sounds too complicated I'll sleep on it and we can discuss it in detail tomorrow. Yes?'

'All right. She put her drink down and sat quite still, as if arranging her thoughts. At length she said, 'The Republic of Monterey maintains close ties with the Free State of Mendocino. I understand that Mendocino and the Empire broke off relations a little while back.'

'A fishing dispute, nothing major.'

'But you have no direct contact with them right now. Therefore this should come as news to you. The Mendocino people have earned and have communicated to our representative there that an invasion of San Francisco is imminent.'

Christensen blinked twice. 'By whom?'

'The Realm of Wicca,' she said.

'Flying down from Oregon on the broomsticks?'

'Please, I'm being serious.'

'Unless things have changed up there,' Christensen said, 'the Realm of Wicca is nonviolent like all the neopagan states. As I understand it, they tend their farms and practice their little pagan rituals and do a lot of dancing around the Maypole and chanting and screwing. You expect me to believe that a bunch of gentle, goofy witches are going to make war on the Empire?'

She said, 'Not war. An invasion.'

'Explain.'

'One of their high priests has proclaimed San Francisco a holy place and has instructed them to come down here and build a Stonehenge in Golden Gate Park in time for proper celebration of the winter solstice. There are at least a quarter of a million neopagans in the Willamette Valley, and more than half of them are expected to take part. According to our Mendocino man, the migration has already begun and thousands of Wiccans are spread out between Mount Shasta and Ukiah right now. The solstice is only seven weeks away. The Wiccans may be gentle, but you're going to have a hundred fifty thousand of them in San Francisco by the end of the month, pitching tents all over town.'

'Holy Jesus,' Christensen muttered.

'Can you feed that many strangers? Can you find room for them? Will San Franciscans meet them with open arms? Do you think it will be a love festival?'

'It'll be a fucking massacre,' Christensen said tonelessly.

'Yes. The witches may be nonviolent, but they know how to practice self-defense.'

Once they're attacked, there'll be rivers of blood, and it won't all be Wiccan blood.'

Christensen's head was pounding again. She was absolutely right: chaos, strife, bloodshed. And a merry Christmas to all. He rubbed his aching forehead, turned away from her, and stared out at the deepening twilight and the sparkling lights of the city on the other side of the bay. A bleak, bitter depression was taking hold of his spirit. He signaled for another round of drinks. Then he said slowly, 'They can't be allowed to enter the city. We'll need to close the imperial frontier and turn them back before they get as far as Santa Rosa. Let them build their goddamned Stonehenge in Sacramento if they like.' His eyes flickered. He started to assemble ideas. 'The Empire might just have enough troops to contain the Wiccans by itself, but I think this is best handled as a regional problem. We'll call in forces from our allies as far out as Petaluma and Napa and Palo Alto. I don't imagine we can expect much help from the Free State or from San Jose. And of course Monterey isn't much of a military power, but still—'

'We are willing to help,' Ms. Sawyer said.

'To what extent?'

'We aren't set up for much actual warfare, but we have access to our own alliances from Salinas down to Paso Robles, and we could call up, say, five thousand troops at a toll. Would that help?'

'That would help,' Christensen said.

'It shouldn't be necessary for there to be any combat. With the imperial border sealed and troops posted along the line from Guerneville to Sacramento, the Wiccans won't force the issue. They'll revise their revelation and celebrate the solstice somewhere else.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I think you're right.' He leaned toward her and asked, 'Why is Monterey willing to help us?'

'We have problems of our own brewing—with San Jose. If we are seen making a conspicuous gesture of solidarity with the Empire, it might discourage San Jose from proceeding with its notion of annexing Santa Cruz. That amounts to an act of war against us. Surely San Jose isn't interested in making any moves that will bring the Empire down on its back.'

She wasn't subtle, but she was effective. *Quid pro quo, we help you keep the witches out, you help us keep San Jose in line, and all remains well without a shot being fired. These goddamned little nations, he thought, these absurd jerkwater sovereignties with*

their wars and alliances and shifting confederations. It was like a game, like playground politics. Except that it was real. What had fallen apart was not going to be put back together, not for a long while and this miniaturized *Weltpolitik* was the real reality there was just now. At least things were saner in Northern California than they were down south where Los Angeles was gobbling everything and there were rumors that Pasadena had the Bomb. Nobody had to contend with that up here.

Christensen said, "I'll have to propose all this to the Defense Ministry, of course. And get the Emperor's approval. But basically I agree with your thinking."

"I'm so pleased."

"And I'm very glad that you took the trouble to travel up from Monterey to make these matters clear to us."

"Merely a case of enlightened self-interest," Ms. Sawyer said.

"Mmm. Yes." He found himself studying the sharp planes of her cheekbones, the delicate arch of her eyebrows. Not only was she cool and competent, Christensen thought, but now that the business part of their meeting was over, he was coming to notice that she was a very attractive woman and that he was not as tired as he had

thought he was. Did international politics allow room for a little recreational hanky-panky? Metternich hadn't jumped into bed with Talleyrand, nor Kissinger with Indira Gandhi, but times had changed after all and—no. No. He choked off that entire line of thought. In these shabby days they might all be children playing at being grown-ups, but nevertheless international politics still had its code, and this was a meeting of diplomats, not a blind date or a singles-bar pickup. *You will sleep in your own bed tonight*, he told himself, *and you will sleep alone*.

All the same he said, "It's past six o'clock. Shall we have dinner together before I go back to the city?"

"I'd love to."

"I don't know much about Berkeley restaurants. We're probably better off eating right here."

"I think that's best," she said.

They were the only ones in the hotel's enormous dining room. A staff of three waited on them as if they were the most important people who had ever dined there. And dinner turned out to be quite decent, he thought—calamari and abalone and sand dabs and grilled thresher shark, washed down with a dazzling bottle of Napa

Chardonnay. Even though the world had ended, it remained possible to eat very well in the Bay Area, and the breakdown of society had not only reduced maritime pollution but also made local seafood much more readily available for local consumption. There wasn't much of an export trade possible with eleven heavily guarded national boundaries and eleven sets of customs barriers between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Dinner conversation was light, relaxed—diplomatic chitchat, gossip about events in remote territories, reports about the Voodoo principality expanding out of New Orleans and the Sioux conquests in Wyoming and the Prohibition War now going on in what used to be Kentucky. There was a bison herd again on the Great Plains, she said, close to a million head. He told her what he had heard about the Suicide People who ruled between San Diego and Tijuana and about King Barnum & Bailey I., who governed in northern Florida with the aid of a court of circus freaks. She smiled and said, "How can they tell the freaks from the ordinary people? The whole world's a circus now, isn't it?"

He shook his head and replied, "No, a zoo," and he beckoned the waiter for more



wire. He did not ask her about internal matters in Monterey, and she tactfully stayed away from the domestic problems of the Empire of San Francisco. He was feeling easy, buoyant, a little drunk, more than a little drunk, to have to answer questions now about the little rebellion that had been suppressed in Sausalito or the secessionist thing in Walnut Creek would be a bringdown, and bad for the digestion.

About half past eight he said, "You aren't going back to Monterey tonight, are you?"

"God no. It's a five-hour drive assuming no more troubles with the San Jose Highway Patrol. And the roads so bad below Watsonville that only a lunatic would drive it at night. I'll stay here at the Claremont."

"Good. Let me put it on the imperial account," he said.

"That isn't necessary. We—"

"The hotel is always glad to oblige the government and its guests."

Ms. Sawyer shrugged. "Very well. We'll reciprocate when you come to Monterey." Fine.

And then her manner suddenly changed. She shifted in her seat and fidgeted and played with her silverware, looking awkward and ill at ease. Some new and big topic was obviously about to be introduced, and Christensen guessed that she was going to ask him to spend the night with her. In a fraction of a second he ran through all the possible merits and demerits of that, and came out on the plus side, and had his answer ready when she said "Tom, can I ask a big favor?"

Which threw him completely off balance. Whatever was coming, it certainly wasn't what he was expecting.

"I'll do my best."

"I'd like an audience with the Emperor."

"What?"

"Not on official business. I know the Emperor talks business only with his ministers and privy councillors. But I want to see him, that's all." Color came to her cheeks. "Doesn't it sound silly? But it's something I've always dreamed of, a kind of adolescent fantasy. To be in San Francisco, to be shown into the imperial throne room, to kiss his ring, all that pomp and circumstance. I want it, Tom. Just to be there to see him. Do you think you could manage that?"

He was astounded. The facade of cool, tough competence had dropped away from her, revealing unanticipated absurdity. He did not know what to answer.

She said, "Monterey's such a poky little place. It's just a town. We call ourselves a

republic, but we aren't much of anything. And I call myself a senator and a diplomat, but I've never really been anywhere. San Francisco two or three times when I was a girl, San Jose a few times. My mother was in Los Angeles once, but I haven't been anywhere. And to go home saying that I had seen the Emperor—" Her eyes sparkled. "You're really taken aback, aren't you? You thought I was all ice and microprocessors and instead I'm only a hick, right? But you're being very nice. You aren't even laughing at me. Will you get me an audience with the Emperor for tomorrow?"

"I thought you were afraid to go into San Francisco."

She looked abashed. "That was just a ploy. To make you come over here, to get you to take me seriously and put yourself out a little. Diplomatic wiles. I'm sorry about that. The word was that you were snotty, that you had to be met with strength or you'd be impossible to deal with. But you aren't like that at all. Tom, I want to see the Emperor. He does give audiences, doesn't he?"

"In a manner of speaking. I suppose it could be done."

"Oh, would you? Tomorrow?"

"Why wait for tomorrow?"

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"Not at all," Christensen said. "This is San Francisco. The Emperor keeps weird hours just like the rest of us. I'll phone over there and see if we can be received." He hesitated. "I'm afraid it won't be what you're expecting."

"What do you mean? In what way?"

"The pomp, the circumstance. You're going to be disappointed. You may be better off not meeting him, actually. Stick to your fantasy of imperial majesty. Seriously. I'll get you an audience if you insist, but I don't think it's a great idea."

"Can you be more specific?"

"No."

"I still want to see him. Regardless."

He left the dining room and, with misgivings, began arranging things. The telephone system was working sluggishly that evening, and it took him fifteen minutes to set the whole thing up, but there were no serious obstacles. He returned to her and said, "The ferry will pick us up at the marina in about an hour. There'll be a car waiting on the San Francisco side. The Emperor will be available for viewing around midnight. I tell you that you're not going to enjoy this. The Emperor is old, and he's been sick; he isn't a very interesting person to meet, as I'm sure you would agree."

"All the same," she said. "The one thing I wanted, when I volunteered to be the envoy, was an imperial audience. Please don't discourage me."

"As you wish. Shall we have another drink?"

"How about these?" She produced an enameled cigarette case. "Humboldt County's finest. Gift of the Free State."

He smiled and nodded and took the joint from her. It was elegantly manufactured, fine cockleshell paper, gold monogram, igniter cap even a filter. *Everything else has come apart*, he thought, *but the technology of marijuana is at its highest point in history*. He flicked the cap, took a deep drag, passed it to her. The effect was instantaneous, a new high cutting through the wooze of bourbon and wine and brandy already in his brain, clearing it, expanding his limp and sagging soul. When they were finished with it, they floated out of the hotel. His driver and hers were still waiting in the parking lot. Christensen dismissed his, and they took the Republic of Monterey car down the slopes of Berkeley to the marina. The boat from San Francisco was late. They stood around shivering at the ferry slip for twenty minutes, peering bleakly across at the glittering lights of the far-off city. Neither of them was dressed for the nighttime chill, and he was tempted to pull her close and hold her in his arms, but he did not. There was a boundary he was not yet willing to cross. *Hell*, he thought, *I don't even know her first name*.

It was nearly eleven by the time they reached San Francisco.

An official car was parked at the pier. The driver hopped out, saluting, bustling about—one of those preposterous little civil-service types, doubtless keenly honored to be taxing bigwigs around late at night. He wore the red-and-gold uniform of the imperial dragoons, a little frayed at one elbow. The car coughed and sputtered and reluctantly lurched into life, up Market Street to Van Ness and then north to the palace. Ms. Sawyer's eyes were wide, and she stared at the ancient high-rises along Van Ness as if they were cathedrals.

When they came to the Civic Center area she gasped, obviously overwhelmed by the majesty of everything, the shattered bulk of the Symphony Hall, the Museum of Modern Art, the great dome of City Hall, and the Imperial Palace itself, awesome, imposing, a splendid, many-columned building that long ago had been the War Memorial Opera House. With the envoy from

the Republic of Monterey at his elbow. Christensen marched up the steps of the palace and through the center doors into the lobby, where a great many of the ranking ministers and plenipotentiaries of the Empire were assembled. "How absolutely marvelous," Ms. Sawyer murmured. Smiling graciously, bowing, nodding, Christensen pointed out the notables, the defense minister, the minister of finance, the minister of suburban affairs, the chief justice, the minister of transportation.

Precisely at midnight there was a grand flourish of trumpets and the door to the throne room opened. Christensen offered Ms. Sawyer his arm; together they made the long journey down the center aisle and up the ramp to the stage, where the imperial throne, a resplendent thing of rhinestones and foil, glittered brilliantly under the spotlights. Ms. Sawyer was wonderstruck. She pointed toward the six gigantic portraits suspended high over the stage and whispered a question, and Christensen replied, "The first six emperors. And here comes the seventh one."

"Oh," she gasped. But was it awe, surprise, or disgust?

He was in his full regalia, the scarlet robe, the bright green tunic with ermine trim, the gold chains. But he was wobbly and tottering, a clumsy, staggering figure, gray-faced and feeble, supported on one side by Mike Schiff, the Imperial Chamberlain, and on the other by the Grand Sergeant-at-Arms, Terry Coleman. He was not so much leaning on them as being dragged by them. Bringing up the rear of the procession were two sleek, pretty boys, one black and one Chinese, carrying the orb, the scepter, and the massive crown. Ms. Sawyer's fingers tightened on Christensen's forearm, and he heard her catch her breath as the Emperor, in the process of being lowered into his throne, went boneless and nearly spilled to the floor. Somehow the Imperial Chamberlain and the Grand Sergeant-at-Arms settled him properly in place, balanced the crown on his head, and stuffed the orb and scepter into his trembling hands. "His Imperial Majesty, Norton the Seventh of San Francisco!" cried Mike Schiff in a magnificent voice that went booming up to the highest balcony. The Emperor giggled.

"Come on," Christensen whispered and led her forward.

The old man was really in terrible shape. It was weeks since Christensen had last seen him, and by now he looked like some-

thing dragged from the crypt, slack-jawed, drooling, vacant-eyed, utterly burned out. The envoy from Monterey seemed to draw back, tense and rigid, repelled, unable or unwilling to go closer, but Christensen persisted, urging her onward until she was no more than a dozen feet from the throne. A sickly-sweet, vaguely familiar odor emanated from the old man.

"What do I do?" she asked, panicking.

"When I introduce you, go forward, curtsy if you know how, touch the orb. Then step back. That's all."

She nodded.

Christensen said, "Your Majesty, the ambassador from the Republic of Monterey, Senator Sawyer, to pay her respects."

Trembling, she went to him, curtsied, touched the orb. As she backed away, she nearly fell, but Christensen came smoothly forward and steadied her. The Emperor giggled again, a shrill, horrific cackle. Slowly, carefully, Christensen guided the shaken Ms. Sawyer from the stage.

"How long has he been like that?"

"Two years, three, maybe more. Completely senile. Not even housebroken anymore. You could probably tell. I'm sorry. I told you you'd be better off skipping this. I'm enormously sorry. Ms — Ms — what's your first name, anyway?"

"Elaine."

"Let's get out of here, Elaine. Yes?"

"Yes. Please."

She was shivering. He walked her up the side aisle. A few of the courtiers were clambering up onto the stage now, one with a guitar, one with juggler's clubs. The imperial giggle pierced the air again and again, becoming rasping and wild. The imperial levee would go on half the night. Emperor Norton VII was one of San Francisco's most popular amusements.

"Now you know," Christensen said.

"How does the Empire function, if the Emperor is crazy?"

"We manage. We do our best without him. The Romans managed it with Caligula. Norton's not half as bad as Caligula. Not a tenth. Will you tell everyone in Monterey?"

"I think not. We believe in the power of the Empire and in the grandeur of the Emperor. Best not to disturb that faith."

"Quite right," said Christensen.

They emerged into the clear, cold night.

Christensen said, "I'll ride back to the ferry slip with you before I go home."

"Where do you live?"

"Out near Golden Gate Park."

She looked up at him and moistened her

lips. "I don't want to ride across the bay in the dark, alone, at this hour of the night. Is it all right if I go home with you?"

"Sure," he said.

They got into the car. "Frederick Street," he told the driver, "between Clayton and Cole."

The trip took twenty minutes. Neither of them spoke. He knew what she was thinking about: the senile Emperor, dribbling and babbling under the bright spotlights. The mighty Norton VII, ruler of everything from San Rafael to San Mateo, from Half Moon Bay to Walnut Creek. Such is pomp and circumstance in imperial San Francisco in these latter days of Western civilization. Christensen sent the driver away, and they went upstairs. The cats were hungry again.

"It's a lovely apartment," she told him.

"Three rooms, bath, hot and cold running water. Not bad for a mere foreign minister. Some of the boys have suites at the palace, but I like it better here." He opened the door to the deck and stepped outside. Somehow, now that he was home, the night was not so cold. He thought about the Realm of Wicca, far off up there in green, happy Oregon, sending a hundred fifty thousand kindly goddess-worshipping neopagans down here to celebrate the rebirth of the sun. A nuisance, a mess, a headache. Tomorrow he'd have to call a meeting of the Cabinet, when everybody had sobered up, and start the wheels turning, and probably he'd have to make trips to places like Petaluma and Palo Alto to get the alliance flanged together. Damn. But it was his job. Someone had to carry the load.

He slipped his arm around the slender woman from Monterey.

"The poor Emperor," she said softly.

"Yes," he agreed. "The poor Emperor. Poor everybody."

He looked toward the east. In a few hours the sun would be coming up over that hill, out of the place that used to be the United States of America and now was a thousand, thousand crazy, fractured, fragmented entities. Christensen shook his head. The Grand Duchy of Chicago, he thought. The Holy Carolina Confederation. The Three Kingdoms of New York. The Empire of San Francisco. No use getting upset—much too late for getting upset. You played the hand that was dealt you, and you did your best, and you carved little islands of safety out of the night. Turning to her, he said, "I'm glad you came home with me tonight." He brushed his lips lightly against hers. "Come. Let's go inside."

ROBERT SILVERBERG

AN APPRECIATION BY HARLAN ELLISON

More brightly than any other writer working in the genre of imaginative literature, Robert Silverberg reflects the conscience of our times.

Beginning his career in the fifties, Silverberg was a perfect manifestation both of the emergence of science fiction as a legitimate art form and the prevailing attitude of young people in America that success was the primary goal for an artist. If his early work is marked by a cool intelligence and an emphasis on solving the puzzle-problems set up by plot, it is likely as much a resonance with that period in our recent history when distancing from social commitment was the order of the day as it was the influence of John W. Campbell, who, as the most prominent editor of his era, set the parameters of the genre as consistent with his own concerns.

But in the mid- to late-sixties, beginning with such novels as *Thorns*, *Nightwings*, *The Masks of Time*, *Up the Line*, and *The Man in the Maze*, Silverberg's legendary proficiency was turned almost feverishly to reinterpretations of the effects on human beings of runaway technology in a world whose soul was in peril. In those novels and the uncounted short stories that filled the chinks in the wall of *oeuvre* he was creating, Silverberg began to reach out through the veil of his intellectual solitude to touch that universal human spirit all serious artists must, inevitably, come to grips with.

From 1970 to 1974, a time of upheaval and metamorphosis in America, Silverberg's work reflected the angst and mortal dreads of the world around him. Massive changes over a decade had altered his view of his species, and of himself, and the work dealt more impressively than that of any other writer of the time with the great questions we had begun to ask ourselves. *Downward to the Earth*, *The World Inside*, *Tower of Glass*, *Son of Man*, *A Time of Changes*, *Dying Inside*, and *The Stochastic Man*—among a flood of others—became deeply troubling icons for a generation of readers learning not only to live decently in their own skins, but who were at last coming to realize they were part of a human chain, each link of which was commanded to ask for whom the bell tolls.

In 1974 Silverberg was lashed into a realization that being point man for the human condition can be dangerous in the extreme. With the end of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the years of civil unrest rumbling to a close, America sought surcease. Weary from a decade of trying to reestablish pride in being a nation flawed but essentially humane, exhausted from the day-after-day struggle to banish the monsters in our midst, America fell gladly into the arms of trivial art; and the fickle audience decided it could not handle the deep-breathing demands Silverberg's uncompromising work placed on them. Turning their eyes back to what seemed (foolishly) an idyllic time, the audience wallowed in escapism of a sort that excluded the nourishment of spirit, the demand for personal responsibility. Silverberg proffered

And so he went away. For five years he was not heard from, and the empty dreams of elfin creatures and unicorns held sophomore sway over Silverberg's former constituency.

Those who knew him intimately were not insensitive to his pain. He went to the earth and he died well, and he maintained close friendships; but despite the sheen of complacency and comfort, it was obvious the surface was pitted with anguish. Beyond the gate there was only silence.

But as the times send some great artists underground to replenish their energies—often against their will—so the pressures of a changing world call those readers of the runes back when their time is come again. And as the eighties dawned, Silverberg made his resurgence. Invigorated, renewed, at once more thoughtful and more vulnerable, perhaps more human at having discovered he was not beyond the reach of rust, he has returned to the world of imaginative literature stronger and more important to our needs.

Reflecting in his ipseity a thirty-year history of science fiction, and the scarred American character, Robert Silverberg returns to us larger than at his beginning or his leave-taking; wiser and more decent. Able to tell us that even when dark wings close down the sky, that the human spirit will prevail . . . if we but accept our kinship with seas and stones and the ghosts of our past.

SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS

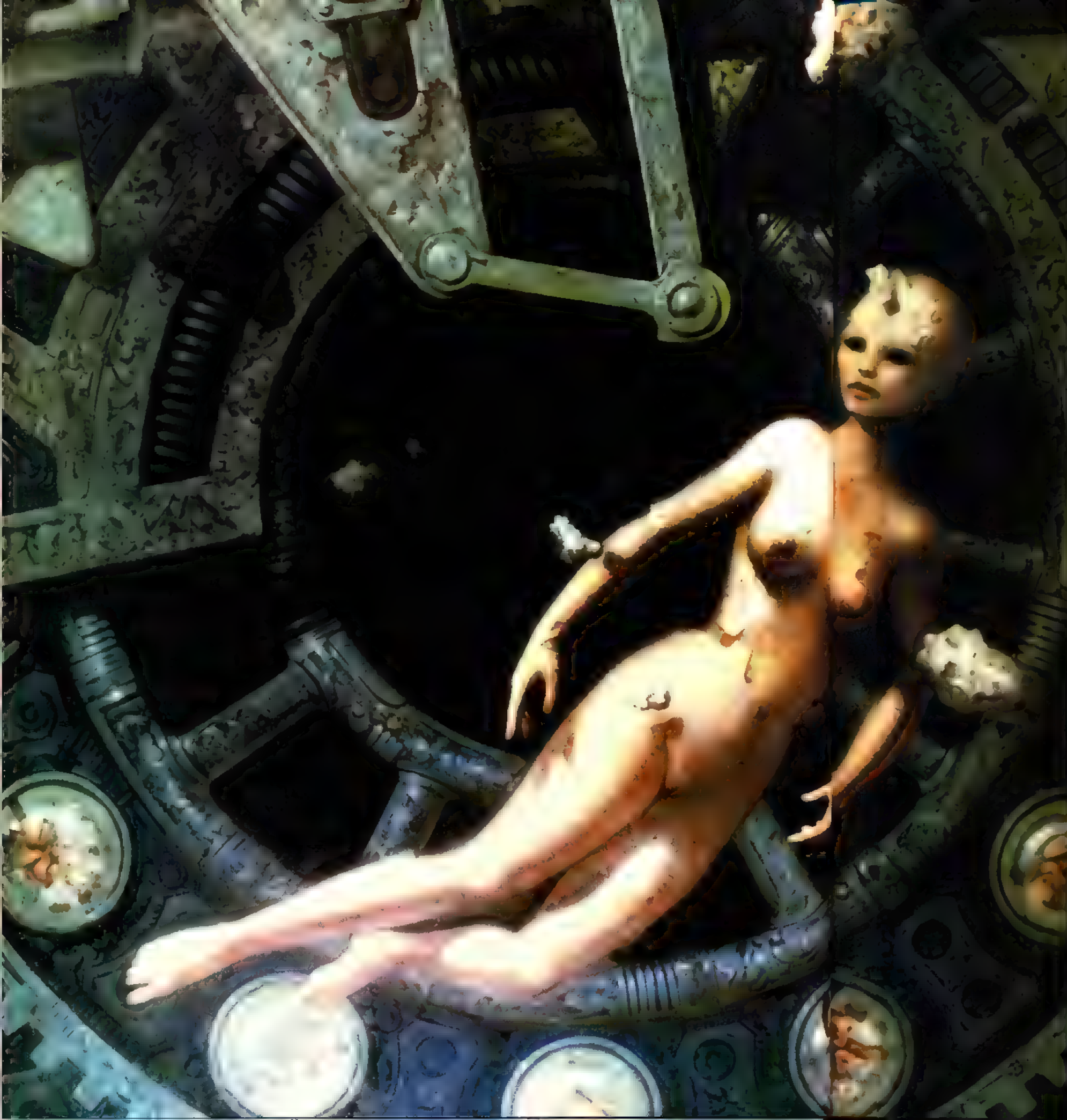
The first volume of *The Best of Omni Science Fiction* was published in April 1980. Its success and that of volume two suggested that vast numbers of new readers were being introduced to the subject. To give this growing audience a sense of literary perspective, a program of publishing SF classics was begun. Thus, in volume three appeared "The Cure" by Lewis Padgett (a pseudonym of Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore). It had been first published in 1945 in *Astounding Science Fiction*.

For volume four there were two classics: "Fondly Fahrenheit," ranked among the very greatest SF stories and first published in 1954, by Alfred Bester and "My Lady of the Psychiatric Sorrows," a poignant, post-holocaust piece first published in 1977, by Brian Aldiss.

The idea has seemed such a good one that for this volume, once again, two classics are presented. They are "Helen O'Loy" (1938), a story of boy *makes* android, by Lester del Rey and "Down There" (1973), a clever encapsulation of the conflict between dehumanization and passion, by Damon Knight.

For those stimulated by these stories to the extent that they wish to pursue readings in the SF canon further, there are several paperback anthologies. Among them are two four-volume sets—*The Road to Science Fiction* (Mentor, New American Library) edited and annotated by James Gunn and *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame* (Avon) edited variously by Robert Silverberg, Ben Bova, Arthur C. Clarke and George W. Proctor. An excellent companion to these anthologies is *A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction* (Facts on File) edited by Baird Searles, et al.

Since artwork is and has been so important to science fiction, this classic section features a pictorial by Chesley Bonestell. He is renowned for his space paintings, many of which appeared as illustrations for covers of SF magazines. The pictorial reprinted here originally appeared in the February 1980 issue of *Omni*.



*He tried to stop her from kissing
him . . . but she was powered by an atomotor*

HELEN O'LOY

BY LESTER DEL REY

I am an old man now, but I can still see Helen as Dave unpacked her and she heard him gasp as he looked her over.

Man, isn't she a beauty?

She was beautiful, a dream in spun plastics and metals—something Keats might have seen dimly when he wrote his sonnet of Helen of Troy had looked like that. The Greeks must have been pickers when they launched only a thousand ships; at least, that's what I told Dave.

"Helen of Troy, eh? He looked at her tag. 'At least it beats this thing—K2W88 Helen . . . Mmmm . . . Helen of A'loy.'

Not much swing to that, Dave. Too many unstressed syllables in the middle. How about Helen O'Looy?"

"Helen O'Looy she is, Phil." And that's how it began—one part beauty, one part dream, one part science, add a stereo broadcast strictly mechanical, and the result is chaos.

Dave and I hadn't gone to college together, but when I came to Messina to practice medicine, I found him downstairs in a little robot repair shop. After that, we began to pal around, and when I started going with one twin, he found the other equally attractive, so we made it a pleasant foursome.

When our business grew better, we rented a house near the rocket field—noisy but cheap, and the rockets discouraged apartment building. We like room enough to stretch ourselves, I suppose, if we hadn't quarreled with them, we'd have married the twins in time. But Dave wanted to look over the latest Venus-rocket attempt when his twin wanted to see a display stereo starring Larry Ainslee, and they were both stubborn. From then on, we forgot the girls

and spent our evenings at home.

But it wasn't until Lena put vanilla on our steak instead of salt that we got off on the subject of emotions and robots. While Dave was dissecting Lena to find the trouble, we naturally mused over the future of the mechs. He was sure that the robots would beat men some day, and I couldn't see it.

"Look here, Dave," I argued. "You know Lena doesn't think—not really. When those wires crossed, she could have corrected herself. But she didn't bother, she followed the mechanical impulse. A man might have reached for the vanilla, but when he saw it in his hand, he'd have stopped. Lena has sense enough, but she has no emotions, no consciousness of self."

"All right, that's the big trouble with the mechs now. But we'll get around it, put in some mechanical emotions, or something." He screwed Lena's head back on, turned on her juice. "Go back to work, Lena. It's nineteen o'clock."

Now I specialized in endocrinology and related subjects. I wasn't exactly a psychologist, but I did understand the glands, secretions, hormones, and mechanisms that are the physical causes of emotions. It took medical science three hundred years to find out how and why they worked, and couldn't see men duplicating them mechanically in much less time.

I brought home books and papers to prove it, and Dave quoted the invention of memory coils and veridic eyes. During that year we swapped knowledge until Dave knew the whole theory of endocrinology and I could have made Lena from memory. The more we talked, the less sure I grew about the impossibility of *Homo mecha-*

PAINTING BY GERARD DI-MACCIO

nensis as the attainable perfect type

Poor Lena. Her copperbody spent half its time in scattered pieces. Our first attempts were successful only in getting her to serve fried brushes for breakfast and wash the dishes in oleo oil. Then one day she cooked a perfect dinner with sex wres crossed, and Dave was in ecstasy.

He worked a night on her wiring, put in a new coil, and taught her a fresh set of words. And the next day she flew into a tantrum and swore vigorously at us when we told her she wasn't doing her work right.

"It's a lie," she yelled, shaking a suction brush. "You're all liars. If you so and so's would leave me whole long enough, I might get something done around the place."

When we calmed her temper and got her back to work, Dave ushered me into the study. "Not taking any chances with Lena," he explained. "We have to cut out that adrenal pack and restore her to normalcy. But we've got to get a better robot. A housemaid mech isn't complex enough."

"How about Dillard's new utility mode?" They seem to combine everything in one.

"Exactly. Even so, we'll need a special one built to order, with a full range of memory coils. And out of respect to old Lena, let's get a female case for its works."

The result, of course, was Helen. The Dillard people had performed a miracle and put all the works in a girl-modeled case. Even the plastic and rubberite face was designed for flexibility to express emotions, and she was complete with tear glands and taste buds, ready to simulate every human action from breathing to pulling hair. The bill they sent with her was another miracle, but Dave and I scraped it together; we had to turn Lena over to an exchange to complete it, though, and thereafter we ate out.

I'd performed plenty of delicate operations on living tissues, and some of them had been tricky, but I still felt like a premed student as we opened the front plate of her torso and began to sever the leads of her nerves. Dave's mechanical glands were all prepared, complex little bundles of radio tubes and wires that heterodyned on the electrical thought impulses and distorted them as adrenaline distorts the reaction of human minds.

Instead of sleeping that night, we pored over the schematic diagrams of her structures, tracing the thoughts through mazes of her wiring, severing the leaders, implanting the heterones, as Dave called them. And while we worked, a mechanical

tape fed carefully prepared thoughts of consciousness and awareness of life and feeling into an auxiliary memory coil. Dave believed in leaving nothing to chance.

It was growing light as we finished, exhausted and exultant. All that remained was the starting of her electrical power; like all the Dillard mechs, she was equipped with a tiny atomotor instead of batteries, and once started would need no further attention on that regard.

Dave refused to turn her on. "Wait until we've slept and rested," he advised. "I'm as eager to try her as you are, but we can't do much studying with our minds half dead. Turn in, and we'll leave Helen until later."

Even though we were both reluctant to follow it, we knew the idea was sound. We turned in, and sleep hit us before the air conditioner could cut down to sleeping temperature. And then Dave was pounding on my shoulders.

"Phil! Hey, snap out of it!"

I groaned, turned over, and faced him. "We? . . . Uh! What is it? Did Helen—"

No, it's old Mrs. van Styler. She visored to say her son has an infatuation for a servant girl, and she wants you to come out and give counter hormones. They're at the summer camp in Maine."

Rich Mrs. van Styler! I couldn't afford to let that account down, now that Helen had used up the last of my funds. But it wasn't a job I cared for.

"Counter hormones! That'll take two weeks full time. Anyway, I'm no society doctor, messing with glands to keep fools happy. My job's taking care of serious medical trouble."

"And you want to watch Helen?" Dave was grinning, but he was serious too. "I told her it'd cost her fifty thousand!"

"Huh?"

"And she said okay, if you hurried."

Of course, there was only one thing to do, though I could have wrung fat Mrs. van Styler's neck cheerfully. It wouldn't have happened if she'd used robots like everyone else—but she had to be different.

Consequently, while Dave was back home pattering with Helen, I was racking my brain to trick Archy van Styler into getting the counter-hormones, and giving the servant girl the same. Oh, I wasn't supposed to, but the poor kid was crazy about Archy. Dave might have written, I thought, but never a word did I get.

It was three weeks later instead of two when I reported that Archy was "cured."

and collected on the line. With that money in my pocket, I hired a personal rocket and was back in Messina in half an hour. I didn't waste time in reaching the house.

As I stepped into the alcove, I heard a light patter of feet, and an eager voice called out "Dave, dear?" For a minute I couldn't answer, and the voice came again, pleading. Dave?

I don't know what I expected, but I didn't expect Helen to meet me that way, stopping and staring at me, obvious disappointment on her face, little hands fluttering up against her breast.

"Oh," she cried. "I thought it was Dave. He hardly comes home to eat now, but I've had supper waiting hours. She dropped her hands and managed a smile. "You're Phil, aren't you? Dave told me about you when . . . at first I'm so glad to see you home, Phil."

"Glad to see you doing so well, Helen. Now what does one say for a light conversation with a robot?" "You said something about supper?"

"Oh, yes, I guess Dave ate downtown again, so we might as well go in. It'll be nice having someone to talk to around the house, Phil. You don't mind if I call you Phil, do you? You know, you're sort of a godfather to me."

We ate. I hadn't counted on such behavior, but apparently she considered eating as normal as waking. She didn't do much eating, at that, most of the time she spent staring at the front door.

Dave came in as we were finishing, a frown a yard wide on his face. Helen started to rise, but he ducked toward the stairs, throwing words over his shoulder.

"Hi, Phil. See you up here later."

There was something radically wrong with him. For a moment I'd thought his eyes were haunted, and as I turned to Helen hers were filling with tears. She gulped, choked them back, and fell to viciously on her food.

"What's the matter with him . . . and you?" I asked.

"He's sick of me." She pushed her plate away and got up hastily. "You'd better see him while I clean up. And there's nothing wrong with me. And it's not my fault, anyway." She grabbed the dishes and ducked into the kitchen; I could have sworn she was crying.

Maybe all thoughts are a series of conditioned reflexes, but she certainly had picked up a lot of conditioning while I was gone. Lena in her heyday had been nothing

ing like this. I went up to see if Dave could make any sense out of the hodgepodge

He was squirting soda into a large glass of apple brandy and I saw that the bottle was nearly empty. "Join me?" he asked.

It seemed like a good idea. The roaring blast of a rocket overhead was the only familiar thing left in the house. From the look around Dave's eyes, it wasn't the first bottle he'd emptied while I was gone, and there were more left. He dug out a new bottle for his own drink.

"Of course, it's none of my business, Dave, but that stuff won't steady your nerves any. What's gotten into you and Helen? Been seeing ghosts?"

Helen was wrong; he hadn't been eating downtown—nor anywhere else. His muscles collapsed into a chair in a way that spoke of fatigue and nerves, but mostly of hunger. "You not ced it, en?"

"Not ced it? The two of you jammed it down my throat."

"Ummmm." He swatted at a nonexistent fly and slumped further down in the pneumatic. Guess maybe I should have waited with Helen until you got back. But if that stereocast hadn't changed... anyway, I did. And those mushy books of yours finished the job.

"Thanks. That makes it all clear."

"You know, Phil, I've got a place up in the country... fruit ranch. My dad left it to me. Think I'll look it over."

And that's the way it went. But finally, by much liquor and more perspiration, I got some of the story out of him before I gave him an amyta and put him to bed. Then I hunted up Helen and dug the rest of the story from her, until it made sense.

Apparently as soon as I was gone, Dave had turned her on and made preliminary tests, which were entirely satisfactory. She had reacted beautifully, so well that he decided to leave her and go down to work as usual.

Naturally, with all her untried emotions, she was filled with curiosity, and wanted him to stay. Then he had an inspiration. After showing her what her duties about the house would be, he set her down in front of the stereovisor, tuned in a travelogue, and left her to occupy her time with looking at it.

The travelogue held her attention until it was finished, and the station switched over to a current serial with Larry Ainslee, the same cute emoter who'd given us all the trouble with the twins. Incidentally he looked

something like Dave did in a vague way.

Helen took to the serial like a sea to water. This playacting was a perfect outlet for her newly excited emotions. When that particular episode finished, she found a love story on another station, and added still more to her education. The afternoon programs were mostly news and music, but by then she'd found my books, and I do have rather adolescent taste in literature.

Dave came home in the best of spirits. The front alcove was neatly swept, and there was the odor of food in the air that he'd missed around the house for weeks. He had visions of Helen as the super-efficient housekeeper.

So it was a shock to him to feel two strong arms around his neck from behind and hear a voice a quiver coo into his ears. "Oh, Dave, darling, I've missed you so, and I'm so thrilled that you're back." Helen's technique may have lacked polish, but it had enthusiasm as he found when he tried to stop her from kissing him. She had learned fast and furiously. Also, Helen was powered by an atomotor.

Dave wasn't a prude, but he remembered that she was only a robot, after all. The fact that she felt, acted, and looked like a young goddess in his arms didn't mean much. With some effort, he untangled her and dragged her off to supper where he made her eat with him to divert her attention.

After her evening work, he called her into the study and gave her a thorough lecture on the folly of her ways. It must have been good for it lasted three solid hours and covered her station in life, the idocy of stereos, and various other miscellanies. When he finished, Helen looked up with dewy eyes and sadly wistfully. "I know, Dave, but I still love you."

That's when Dave started drinking.

It grew worse each day. If he stayed downtown, she was crying when he came home. If he returned on time, she fussed over him and threw herself at him. In his room, with the door locked, he could hear her downstairs pacing up and down and muttering; and when he went down, she stared at him reproachfully until he had to go back up.

I sent Helen out on a fake errand in the morning and got Dave up. With her gone, I made him eat a decent breakfast and gave him a tonic for his nerves. He was still listless and moody.

"Look here, Dave," I broke in on his

brooding. "Helen isn't human, after all. Why not cut off her power and change a few memory coils? Then we can convince her that she never was in love and couldn't get that way."

"You try it. I had that idea, but she put up a wail that would wake Homer. She says it would be murder—and the hell of it is that I can't help feeling the same about it. Maybe she isn't human, but you wouldn't guess it when she puts on that martyred look and tells you to go ahead and kill her."

"We never put in substitutes for some of the secretions present in man during the love period."

"I don't know what we put in. Maybe the heterones backfired or something. Anyway, she's made this idea so much a part of her thoughts that we'd have to put in a whole new set of coils."

"Well, why not?"

"Go ahead. You're the surgeon of this family. I'm not used to fussing with emotions. Matter of fact, since she's been acting this way, I'm beginning to hate work on any robot. My business is going to blaze."

He saw Helen coming up the walk and ducked out the backdoor for the monorail express. I'd intended to put him back in bed, but let him go. Maybe he'd be better off at his shop than at home.

"Dave's gone?" Helen did have that martyred look now.

"Yeah. I got him to eat, and he's gone to work."

"I'm glad he ate." She slumped down in a chair as if she were worn out, though how a mech could be tired beat me. "Phil?"

"Well, what is it?"

"Do you think I'm bad for him? I mean, do you think he'd be happier if I weren't here?"

"He'll go crazy if you keep acting this way around him."

She winced. Those little hands were twisting about pleadingly, and I felt like an inhuman brute. But I'd started, and I went ahead. "Even if I cut out your power and changed your coils, he'd probably still be haunted by you."

"I know. But I can't help it. And I'd make him a good wife. Really I would, Phil."

I gulped, this was getting a little too far. "And give him strapping sons to boot, I suppose. A man wants flesh and blood, not rubber and metal."

"Don't, please! I can't think of myself that way. To me, I'm a woman. And you know perfectly I'm made to imitate a real woman... in all ways. I couldn't give him sons,

but in every other way . . . I'd try so hard, I know I'd make him a good wife."

I gave up.

Dave didn't come home that night, nor the next day. Helen was fussing and fuming, wanting me to call the hospitals and the police, but I knew nothing had happened to him. He always carried identification. Still, when he didn't come on the third day, I began to worry. And when Helen started out for his shop, I agreed to go with her.

Dave was there, with another man I didn't know. I parked Helen where he couldn't see her, but where she could hear, and went in as soon as the other fellow left.

Dave looked a little better and seemed glad to see me. "Hi, Phil—just closing up. Let's go eat."

Helen couldn't hold back any longer, but came trooping in. "Come on home, Dave. I've got roast duck with spice stuffing, and you know you love that."

"Scat!" said Dave. She shrank back, turned to go. "Oh, all right, stay. You might as well hear it, too. I've sold the shop. The fellow you saw just bought it, and I'm going up to the old fruit ranch. I told you about Phil. I can't stand the mechs any more."

"You'll starve to death at that," I told him.

"No, there's a growing demand for old-fashioned fruit raised out of doors. People are tired of this water-culture stuff. Dad always made a living out of it. I'm leaving as soon as I can get home and pack."

Helen clung to her idea. "I'll pack, Dave, while you eat. I've got apple cobbler for dessert." The world was toppling under her feet, but she still remembered how crazy he was for apple cobbler.

Helen was a good cook, in fact she was a genius, with all the good points of a woman and a mech combined. Dave ate well enough, after he got started. By the time supper was over, he'd thawed out enough to admit he liked the duck and cobbler, and to thank her for packing. In fact, he even let her kiss him good-bye, though he firmly refused to let her go to the rough field with him.

Heen was trying to be brave when I got back, and we carried on a stumbling conversation about Mrs. van Styler's servants for a while. But the talk began to dull, and she sat staring out of the window at nothing most of the time. Even the stereo comedy lacked interest for her, and I was glad enough to have her go off to her room. She could cut her power down to simulate sleep when she chose.

As the days slipped by, I began to realize why she couldn't believe herself a robot. I got to thinking of her as a girl and companion myself. Except for odd intervals when she went off by herself to brood, or when she kept going to the telescript for a letter that never came, she was as good a companion as a man could ask. There was something homey about the place that Lena had never put there.

I took Helen on a shopping trip to Hudson and she giggled and purred over the wisps of silk and gossamer that were the fashion, tread on endless hats, and conducted herself as any normal girl might. We went trout fishing for a day, where she proved to be as good a sport and as sensibly silent as a man. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and thought she was forgetting Dave. That was before I came home unexpectedly and found her doubled up on the couch, thrashing her legs up and down and crying to the high heavens.

It was then I called Dave. They seemed to have trouble in reaching him, and Helen came over beside me while I waited. She was tense and fidgety as an old maid trying to propose. But finally they located Dave.

"What's up, Phil?" he asked as his face came on the viewplate. "I was just getting my things together to—"

I broke him off. "Things can't go on the way they are, Dave. I've made up my mind. I'm yanking Helen's coils tonight. It won't be worse than what she's going through now."

Helen reached up and touched my shoulder. "Maybe that's best, Phil. I don't blame you."

Dave's voice cut in. "Phil, you don't know what you're doing!"

"Of course, do. It'll all be over by the time you can get here. As you heard, she's agreeing."

There was a black cloud sweeping over Dave's face. "I won't have it, Phil. She's half me and I forbid it!"

"Of all the—"

"Go ahead, call me anything you want. I've changed my mind. I was packing to come home when you called."

Helen jerked around me, her eyes glued to the panel. "Dave, do you . . . are you?"

"I'm just waking up to what a fool I've been, Helen. Phil, I'll be home in a couple of hours, so there's anything."

He didn't have to chase me out. But before I could shut the door, I heard Heen cooing something about loving to be a rancher's wife.

Well, I wasn't as surprised as they thought. I think I knew when I called Dave what would happen. No man acts the way Dave had been acting because he hates a girl; only because he thinks he does—and thinks wrong.

No woman ever made a lovelier bride or a sweeter wife. Helen never lost her flare for cooking and making a home. With her gone, the old house seemed empty, and I began to drop out to the ranch once or twice a week. I suppose they had trouble at times, but I never saw it, and I know the neighbors never suspected they were anything but normal man and wife.

Dave grew older, and Heen didn't, of course. But between us, we put lines in her face and grayed her hair without letting Dave know that she wasn't growing old with him, he'd forgotten that she wasn't human, I guess.

I practically forgot myself. It wasn't until a letter came from Helen this morning that I woke up to reality. There, in her beautiful script, just a trifle shaky in places, was the inevitable that neither Dave nor I had seen.

Dear Phil,

As you know, Dave has had heart trouble for several years now. We expected him to live on just the same, but it seems that wasn't to be. He died in my arms just before sunrise. He sent you his greetings and farewells.

I've one last favor to ask of you, Phil. There is only one thing for me to do when this is finished. Acid will burn out metal as well as flesh, and I'll be dead with Dave. Please see that we are buried together, and that the morticians do not find my secret. Dave wanted it that way, too.

Poor dear Phil, I know you loved Dave as a brother, and how you felt about me. Please don't grieve too much for us, for we have had a happy life together, and both feel that we should cross this last bridge side by side.

With love and thanks from,

Heen

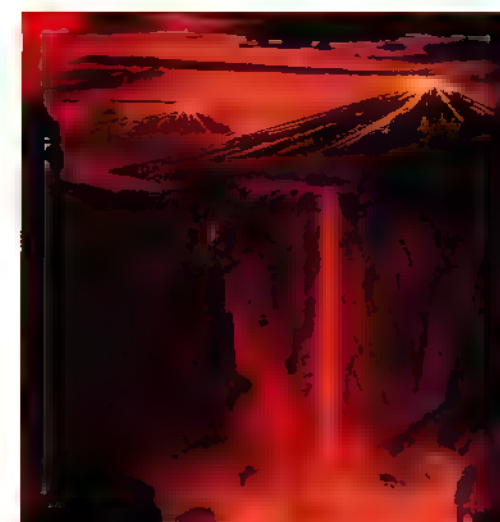
It had to come sooner or later, I suppose, and the first shock has worn off now. I'll be leaving in a few minutes to carry out Helen's last instructions.

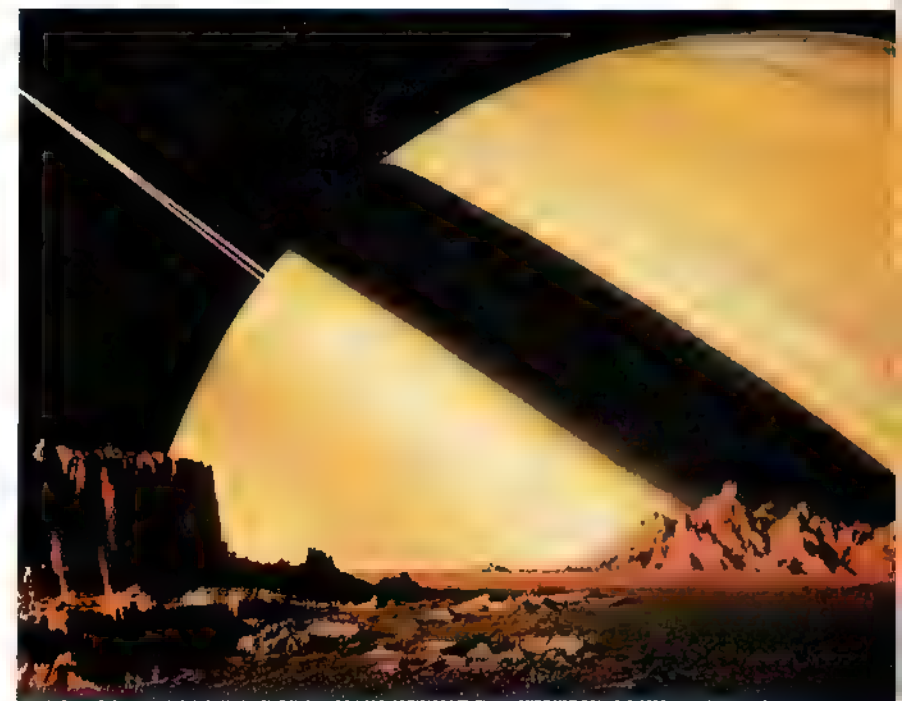
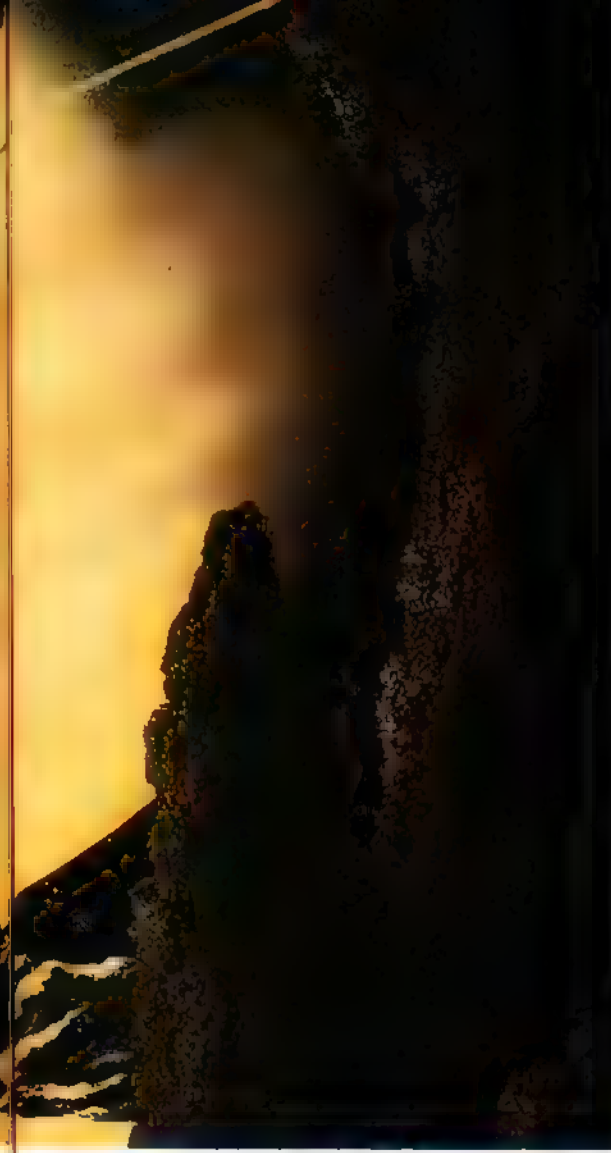
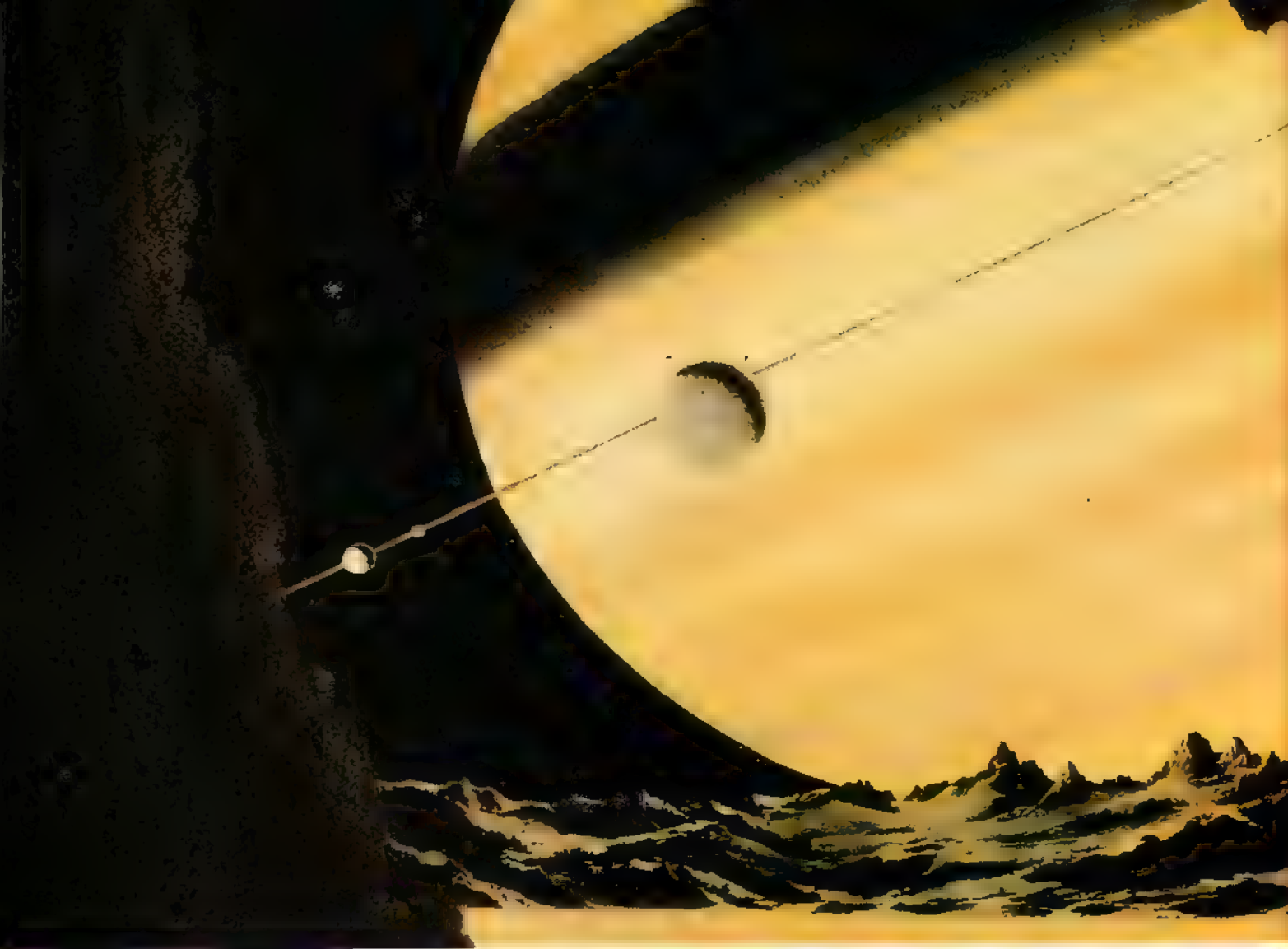
Dave was a lucky man, and the best friend I ever had. And Heen—Well, as I said, I'm an old man now, and can view things more sanely. I should have married and raised a family, I suppose. But . . . there was only one Heen O'Loy.

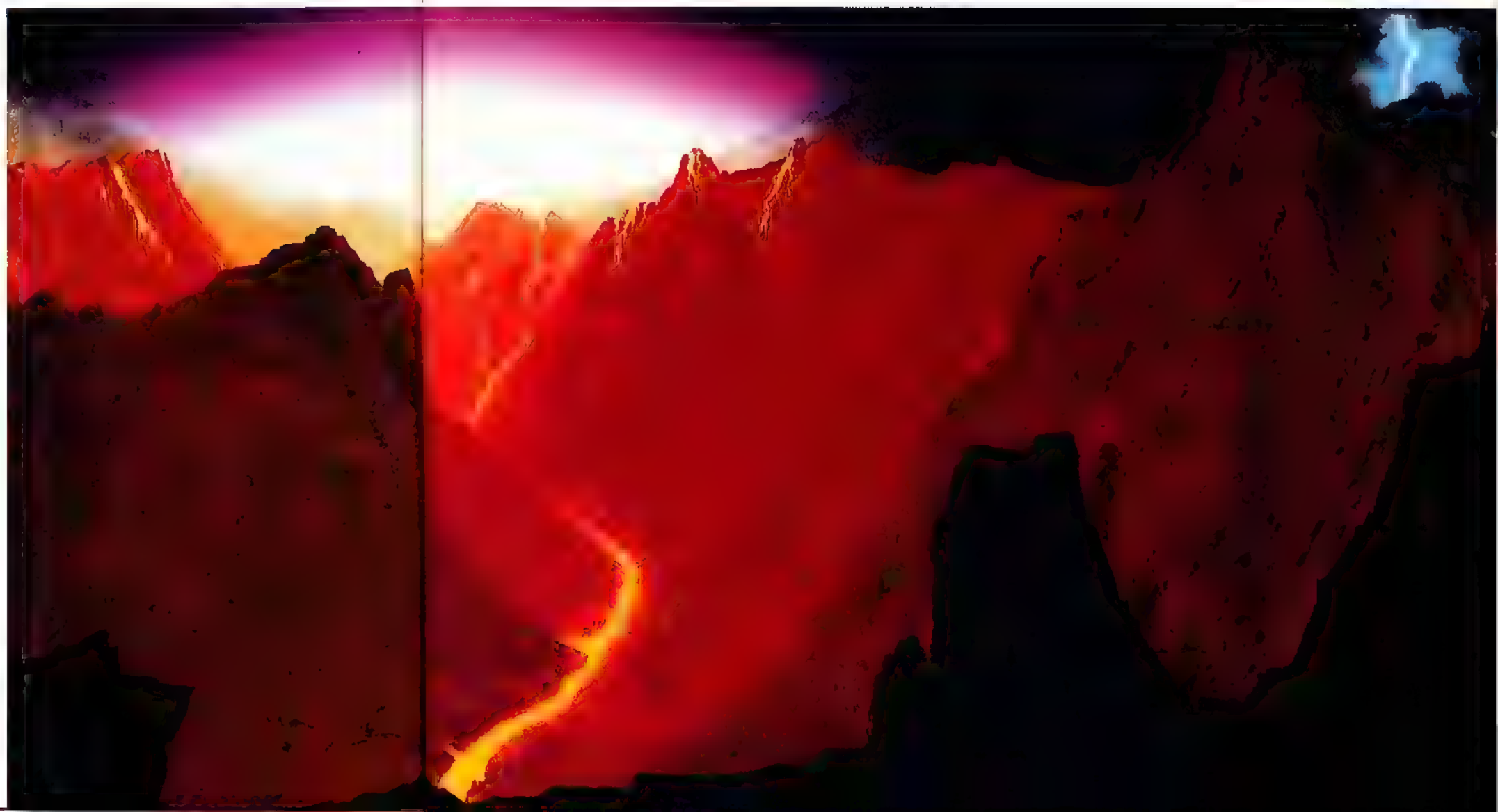
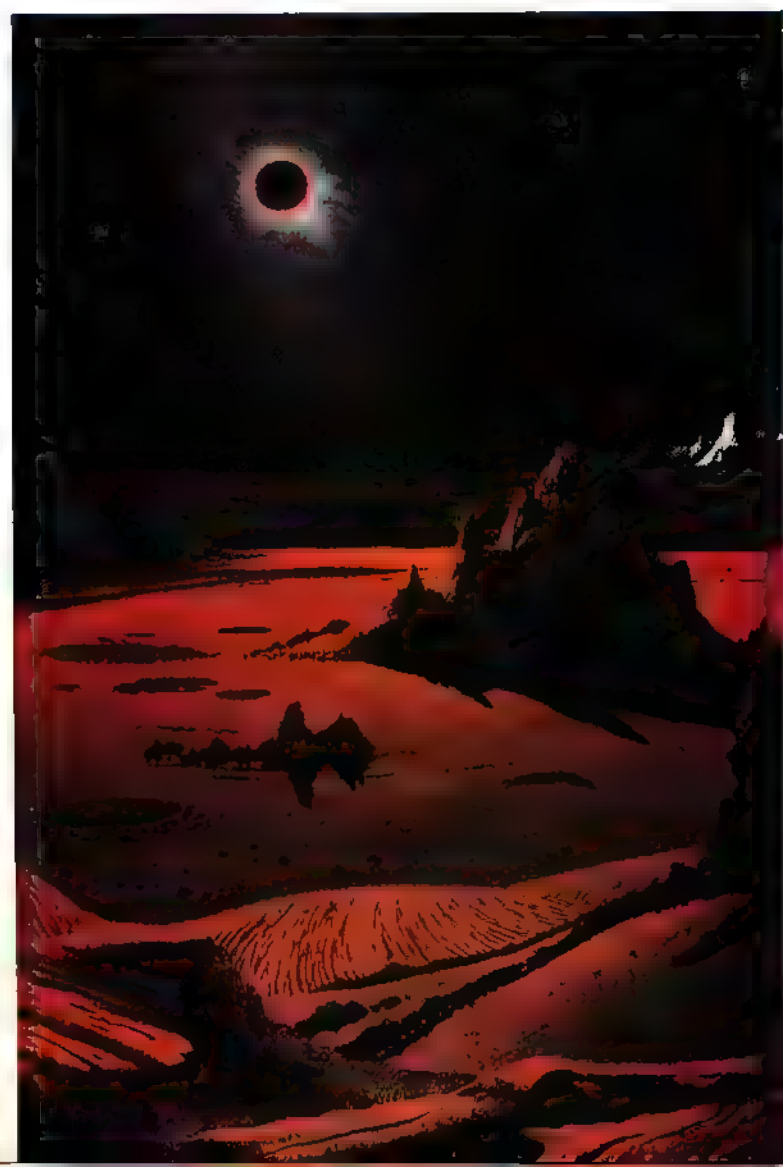
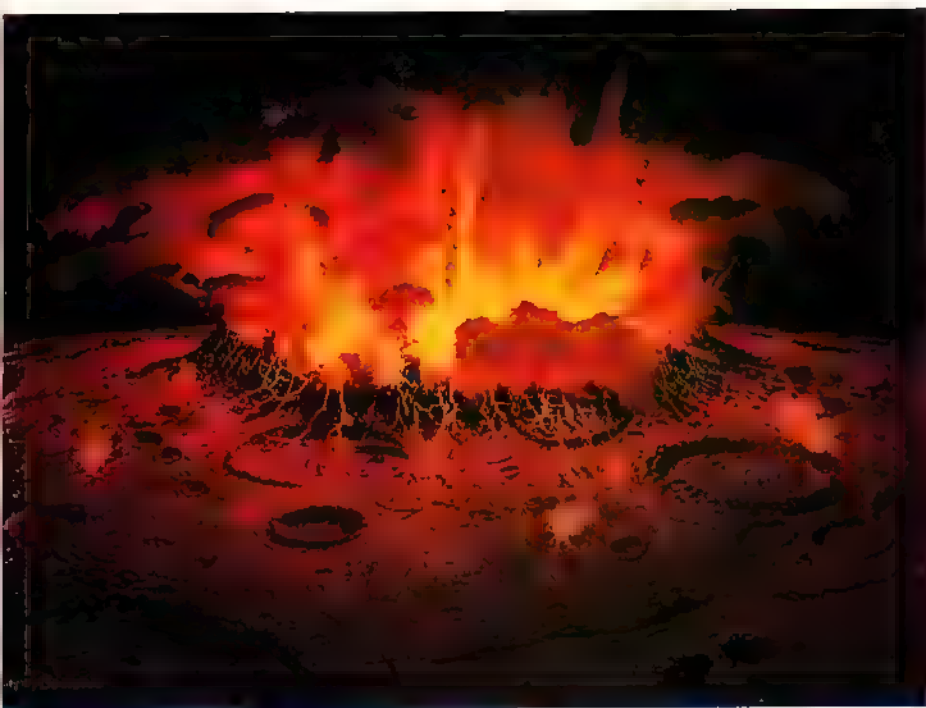
PICTORIAL
NUMBER TWO



CHESLEY
BONESTELL
ARTIST









Norbert needed a computer to help him
write his short stories . . .
but he had another, more compelling need
to help him cope with his existence

DOWN THERE

BY DAMON KNIGHT

The hard gray tile of the corridor rang under his feet, bare gray corridor like a squared-off gun barrel bright ceiling overhead and he thought bore, shaft, tunnel, tube. His door 913. He turned the bright key in the lock, the door slid aside, hissed shut behind him. He heard the bowers begin; faint current of fresh cool air, sanitized, impersonal. The clock over the console blinked from 10:58 to 10:59.

He leaned over the chair, punched the "Ready" button. The dark screen came to life, displayed the symbols "R A NORBERT 00190533170 4/11/2012 10:59:04". The information blinked and vanished, recorded, memorized somewhere in the guts of the computer nine stories down.

Norbert removed his brown corduroy jacket, hung it carefully in the closet. He sat down in front of the console, loosened the foulard around his throat, combed his neat little goatee. He sighed, rubbed his hands together, then punched the music and coffee buttons.

The music drifted out, the coffee spurted into the cup, fragrant brew, invigorating beverage rich brown fluid. He sipped it, set it down, filled his pipe with burley from a silk pouch and lit it.

The screen was patiently blank. He leaned forward, punched "Start." Bright characters blinked across the screen, the printer clattered, a sheet curled out into the tray.

The first one was "WORLD BOOK MOD FEM MAR 5 SET OPT" and the other two were just the same except for length—one four thousand, the other three.

He thought discontentedly of novels; something there a man could get his teeth into, a week just setting up the parameters but then a whole month on the job that could be a bore, and Markwick had told him, "You've got a touch with the short story, Bob." A flair, a certain aptitude, *à la ne sais quoi*. He drank more coffee, put it down. He sighed again, pinched his nose reflectively, touched the "Start" button.

The screen said "2122084 WORLD BOOK MOD FEM MAR SET OPT 5," then

"THEME: COME TO REALIZE VICTORY OVER RIVAL ADJUSTMENT WITH GROUP."

He picked up the light pen, touched the first of the three choices. The other two

disappeared, then the whole array, and the screen said

"SETTING: NEW YORK
PARIS
LONDON
SAN FRANCISCO
DALLAS
BOSTON
D SNEY WORLD
ANTWERP
OCEAN TOWERS"

He hesitated, waving the light pen at the screen. He paused at "Antwerp"—he'd never done that one—but no, too exotic: New York, Paris, London. . . He frowned, clenched the bit of the pipe in his teeth, and plunged for "Ocean Towers." It was a hunch; he felt a little thrill of an idea there.

He called for pictures, and the screen displayed them: first a long shot of the Towers rising like a fabulous castle crowned mountain out of the sea; then a series of interiors, and Norbert stopped it almost at once: there, that was what he wanted, the central vault, with the sunlight pouring down.

Sunlight, he wrote, and the screen added promptly *fell from the ceiling as*—and here Norbert's stabbing finger stopped it, the words remained frozen on the screen while he frowned and sucked on his pipe, his gurgling briar. *Fell* wouldn't do, to begin with, *sunlight* didn't fall like a flowerpot. *Streamed*? Well, perhaps—No, wait, he had it. He touched the word with the light pen, then tapped out *spilled*. Good-oh. Now the next part was too abrupt, there was your computer for you every time, hopeless when it came to expanding an idea; and he touched the space before *ceiling* and wrote *huge panes of the*.

The text now read: *Sunlight spilled from the huge panes of the ceiling as*.

Norbert punched "Start" again and watched the sentence grow. . . as *Inez Trevelyan crossed the plaza among the hurrying throngs*. End of sentence, and he stopped it there. Trevelyan was all right, but he didn't like *Inez*, too spinsterish. What about *Theodora*, no, too many syllables—or *Georgette*? No. Oh, hell, let the computer do it; that's what it was for. He touched the name, then the try again button, and got *Jean Joan Joanna Judith Karen Karla Laura*. There. That had got her—*Laura*

Trevelyan. Now then, *crossed the plaza*—well, a plaza was what it was, but why be so obvious? He touched the offending word with the light pen, wrote *in floor*, and then *murmuring* instead of *hurrying* (appeal to another sense there); and now *hmm*, something really subtle, he deleted the period and wrote *in of morning*.

Sunlight spilled from the huge panes of the ceiling as Laura Trevelyan crossed the floor among the murmuring throngs of morning.

Not bad, not bad at all. He sipped coffee, then wrote *The light*. You had to keep the computer at it, or it would change the subject every time. The sentence prolonged itself *was so brilliant and sparkling* and he stopped it and revised, and so on, and in a moment he had: *The light was so yellow and pure, even where it reflected from the floor amid the feet of the passersby, that it reminded Laura of a field of yellow daisies. The real sun was up there somewhere, she knew, but it was so long since she had seen it.*

Good. Now a little back-look. Her first day in Ocean Towers, she remembered unexpectedly, it had been gray outside and the great hall had been full of pearly light. It had seemed so wonderful and thrilling then. It had taken some pluck for her to come here at all—cutting her ties with County Clare, leaving all her family and friends to go and live in this strange echoing place, not even on land but built on pylons sunk into the ocean floor. But *Eric's* and *Henry's* careers were here, and where they went she must go.

She had married *Eric Trevelyan* when she was nineteen; he was a talented and impetuous man who was making a name for himself as a professional table-tennis player (A mental note: *at a moment* be better but did they have *jai-alai* in Ocean Towers? Check it in a moment.) He had the easy charm and bluff good humor of the English, and an insatiable appetite for living—more parties, more sex, more everything. His teammate, *Henry Ricardo*, who had joined the marriage two years later, was everything that *Eric* was not: solid, dependable, a little slow, but with a rare warmth in his infrequent smiles.

So much for that. Norbert punched the query button and typed out his question

PAINTING BY ROWENA MORRILL

about jai-alai in Ocean Towers and found they had it all right, but on thinking it over he decided to make it chess instead: there was something a little wonky about the idea of a slow jai-alai player, or for that matter table tennis either. And besides, he himself loathed sports, and it would be a bore looking up rules and so on.

Anyhow now for a touch of plot. Eric and Henry, it appeared, were rising in their field and had less and less time for Laura. An interesting older man approached her, but she repulsed him, and took the transpolar jet back to County Clare.

The computer displayed a map of Ireland, and Norbert picked a town called Newmarket-on-Fergus, avoiding names like Killybeg, Lisycasey and Doonbeg that were too obvious and quaint. Besides, Newmarket was not far from Shannon Airport and that made it plausible that Laura had met Eric there in the first place.

Laura was rapturous to be home again (the daisies were in bloom), and although the Clancy cottages seemed crowded and smelly to her now it didn't matter, but after a few weeks she grew tired of watching the cows every day and the telly every night, and went over to Limerick for a party. But Limerick was not what she was seeking, either, and she finally admitted to herself that she was homesick for Ocean Towers. The register stood at 4,031 words.

Laura took the next jet back to Ocean Towers and had an emotional reconciliation with Eric (but Henry was a little cool) only to learn that they had been offered a three-year contract in Buenos Aires. Walking the promenade over the Pacific that night, unable to sleep, she met the older man again (Harlan Moore) and wept in his arms. The next morning she called Eric and Henry together and told them her news. "You must go on to the wonderful things and far places that are waiting for you," she said. "But I—" and her eyes were suddenly as misty as the dawn over Killybeg— "I know now that my yellow daisies are here."

Five thousand, two hundred and fifteen words: pretty close. He became aware that he was hungry and that his legs ached from sitting so long. The clock above the console stood at 2.36.

No point in starting on the next one now: he would only go stale on it over the weekend. He got up and stretched until his joints cracked, walked back and forth a little to get the stiffness out, then sat down again and relit his pipe. When he had finished drawing

to his satisfaction, he leaned forward and punched the retrieval code for a thing of his own he had been working on: the one that began, "Chirping down the bloodstream: gneiss between his teeth," and so on. He read it as far as it went, added a few words half-heartedly and deleted them again. *Ficciones* would probably send it back with a rejection slip as usual: the bastards, although it was exactly like the stuff they printed all the time; if you weren't in their clique, you didn't have a chance. He tapped out, "THANK HEAVEN IT'S THURSDAY" and blanked the screen.

At 2.58 the screen lit up again: a summary of his weekly earnings and deductions. The printer clattered; a sheet fell into the tray. Norbert picked it up, glanced at the total, then folded the sheet and put it into his breast pocket, thinking absently that he really had better cut down this week and pay back some of his debit. He remembered the music and turned it off. The soothing strains. He punched the "Finished" button and the screen came to life once more, displaying the symbols "R A NORBERT CG190533170 4/11/2012 3 01.44." Then it blinked and went dark. Norbert waited a moment to see if there was anything else: a message from Markwich, for instance, but there wasn't. He straightened his foulard, took down his jacket and put it on. The door hissed shut behind him, and he heard the wards of the lock snick home. Down the gunmetal corridor. He gave his key to the putty-faced security guard: a crippled veteran of the Race War who had never spoken a word in Norbert's memory. In the public corridor a few people were hurrying past, but not many: it was still early. That was how Norbert liked it: if you could choose your own hours, why work when everybody else did? He punched for twenty and the elevator whisked him up. Here the traffic was a little brisker. Norbert got into line at the mono stop, looking over the vending machines while he waited. There were new issues of *Madame*, *Chatelaine*, *Worldbook* and *After Four*. He punched for all of them and put his card into the slot. The machine blinked, chugged, slammed the copies into the receptacle. Moving away, he could hear the whirring of the fax machines making more.

After Four had nothing of his, as he had expected—he did very little men's stuff. But *Madame* and *Chatelaine* had one of his stories apiece, and *Worldbook* two. He checked the indicia to make sure his name was there. "Every Sunday," by IBM and

R. A. Norbert," the only recognition he would get. The stories themselves were unsigned, although occasionally one of them would say, "By the author of 'White Magic'" or whatever. He boarded the shuttle and sat down, leafing through the magazines. "Making Do with Abundance," by Mayor Antonio, illustrated by a cornucopia dribbling out watches, cigar lighters, bottles of perfume, packages tied with blue satin bows. A garish full-page ad, "Be Thoroughly You—Use Vaginal Gloss. The best way to give it to you is with a brush." "Q Fever—the Unknown Killer." "Race Suicide—Is It Happening to Us?" by Sherwood M. Sibley. The medical article had an IBM house name for a byline, but the others were genuine. He had met Sibley once or twice at house parties—a pop-eyed, nervous man with a damp handshake, but judging by the clothes he wore, he must be making plenty. And it was really unfair how much better non-fiction writers were treated, but, as Markwich said, that was the public taste for you, and the pendulum would swing.

He got off at Fifth Avenue and changed to the uptown mono. The lights in the car were beginning to make his head ache. As the car pulled up at the 50th Street stop, he looked back and saw something curious: a sprawled black figure hanging in midair in the canyon of the avenue. Then the car pulled in: other people were getting up, and by the time he could see in that direction again, it was gone; but he knew somehow that it had been too big and the wrong shape for anything but a man falling. He wondered briefly how on earth the man had got outside the building. All the balconies were roofed and glassed in. The fellow must have been a workman or something.

The farther uptown they went, the more crowded the mono cars were on the other side of the avenue, going south: it was getting on toward the dinner hour. The crowds he could see on the balconies were mostly touristy-looking people in Chicagoland suits and West Coast freak outfits, white haired and swag-bellied. Some of the women did as they were, had smooth Gordonized faces. A few Pakistanis, a little younger. Really, he told himself, he was lucky to have such a good job, young as he was, and let's face it, he didn't have the temperament for going out and interviewing people, gathering information and all that.

The man beside him, getting off at 76th Street, dropped his newspaper on the seat

and Norbert picked it up. MORE KIDNAP-MURDER VICTIMS FOUND WILL MARRY KEN ORVILLE ELLA MAE, UNVERSE LESS THAN 2 BILLION YEARS OLD SAYS COLUMBIA PROF. The usual thing. At 125th Street, a glimpse of the sky as he stepped out onto the platform: it was faintly greenish beyond the dome. He crossed the public corridor to the bright chrome and plastic lobby of BankAmerica. At the exchange window, he presented his card to the blond young woman. "Another twenty-five, Mr. Norbert?"

"That's right, yes, twenty-five."

"You must really like currency." She made a note on a pad, put his card into her machine and tapped keys.

No, I don't really—I travel a good deal, you see. It isn't safe to carry credit cards anymore. She glanced up at him silently, withdrew his card from the machine. "They kidnap you and make you buy things," he further explained.

Her beautiful, Gordonized face did not change. She counted out the bills, pushed them across the counter. Norbert took them hastily, sure that his cheeks were flushed. It was no use, he would have to change banks; she knew there was no legitimate reason to draw twenty-five dollars in cash every week. . . . "Thank you, good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Norbert. Have an enjoyable journey."

In the public corridor of his level a few minutes later, he ran into Art and Ellen. When they heading for the elevators. Art and he had been roommates at one time, and then when they got married, Art and Ellen moved up to one of the garden apartments on the fifteenth floor. They looked stiff and dressed-up in identical orange plasticques. "Why, here he is now," said Art. "Bob, this is real luck. We were just trying to get you on the phone, then we went and banged on your door. This is Phyllis McManus—" he turned to a slight, pale blonde Norbert had not noticed until now. "And her date stood her up. Well, you know, ah, his mother is sick. Anyhow, we've got tickets to the ice opera at the Garden, and we're going to Yorty's afterwards. What do you say, would you like to come along?" Phyllis McManus smiled faintly, not quite looking at Norbert. Her virginal charm. "You will come, won't you, Bob?" said Ellen, speaking for the first time. She gave his arm a squeeze.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Norbert, letting his eyes gaze and bulge a little with sincerity. "I promised my sister I'd have dinner with her tonight—it's her birthday and, you know . . ." He shrugged, smiled. "I

would have loved it, Miss McManus, really. I can't say how sorry I am."

"Oh, well, that's really a shame," said Art. "You're sure you couldn't call her up—tell her something—"

"Sorry . . . just can't be done. Hope you have a good time anyhow. Good-bye, Miss McManus, nice to have met you . . ."

They drifted apart, with regretful calls and gestures. When they were safely gone, Norbert headed for the private corridor. His room, 2703; the telephones showed it was a right. He unlocked the door, closed and barred it behind him with a shudder of relief. The little green room was quiet and cool. He rolled up the closet blind, undressed and hung his clothes up with care. Before he stepped into the mini-shower, he punched for a Martini and a burger-bits casserole, his favorite. Then the refreshing spray. Air-dried and out again, he ate leisurely, watching the 3D and leafing through the magazines he had bought. By now Art and Ellen and what's-her-name would be sitting in a row at the Garden under the lights, watching the mannequins cavort on the ice-covered arena below.

Norbert's thoughts were beginning to tremble. He dressed again, quickly, in his street clothes—dirty denim pants, a faded turtleneck, a cracked vinyl jacket. He retrieved the wad of bills from his wallet, pulled the closet blind down again. He locked and secured the door behind him. Once out of the building, he took the shuttle crosstown to Broadway, down two levels, then north again to 168th Street. The dingy concourse was echoing, almost empty. Two or three dopes twitching and mumbling rode the escalator down with him. He came out into the gray street, slick and shiny under the glare of dusty light panels. Streaks of rust down the gray walls. The spattered pavement, here since LaGuardia, globs of sputum, puddles of degradable plastic. Posters on the walls: PARENTHOOD MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH. DRIP, DON'T DROP. WHAT DID KIDS EVER DO FOR YOU? Rumble of semis and vans on the expressway just overhead; electric signs dimming on the avenue. Haunting red and blue of 3D signs, the faint sound of music.

Norbert went into the Peachtree and had a quick shot at the bar; he wanted another, but was too nervous and walked out again. In the window of Eddie's, three or four good old boys were tucking into a platter of pork and mustard greens. Norbert crossed the avenue and turned west on 169th. The

doorways were full of babies and their girls lounging and spitting; one or two of them gave him a knowing look as he went by. "Hey, yonky," called a mocking voice just bare and bare. Norbert kept walking, past a few closed storefronts into an area of crumbling apartment houses built in the sixties. The front windows were all dark, the hallways lit only by naked yellow bulbs. At the remembered entry, he stopped, looked around. On the sidewalk beside an arrangement of numbered squares, someone had written in yellow chalk, "Lucy's a Hoka." He went in under the sick yellow light. The hallway stank of boiled greens and vomit. The door at the end was ajar.

"Well, come awn in," said theanky old man in the armchair. His blue eyes stared at Norbert without apparent recognition.

"Don't knock, nobody else does, walk right in." Norbert tried to smile. The others at the card table looked up briefly and went back to their game. The red drapes at the courtyard window were pulled back as if to catch a breeze. Somewhere up there in the blackness a voice burst out furiously. "You cocksucker, if I catch you . . ."

"Hello, Buddy," said Norbert. "Flo here?" "Flo?" said the old man. "No sir, she snore enough ain't."

Norbert's insides went how. "She's not? I mean—where'd she go?"

The old man waved his arm in a vague gesture. "Down home, I reckon." He stood up slowly. "Got us a new gal just up from the country this mornin'." He put one hand casually between Norbert's shoulder blades and pushed him toward one of the bedroom doors.

"Well, I don't know," said Norbert, trying to hang back.

"Come on," said the old man in his ear. "She do innie-thang. You wait now."

They were standing in front of the door pressed so tightly together that Norbert could smell the old man's stale underwear. Swoen knuckles rapped the door. "Betty Lou?"

After a frozen moment, the door began to open. A woman was standing there, monstrous in a flowered housedress. Norbert's heart jumped. She was olive-skinned, almost Latin-looking, the folds of her heavy face were so dark that they seemed grimy. She looked at him steadily from under brows like black caterpillars, her eyes were evil, weary and compassionate. She took his hand. The old man said something which he did not hear. Then the door had closed behind him and they were alone.

SCIENCE FICTION ORIGINALS

Although the title of this series, strictly interpreted, would require that all material in it be reprinted from *Omni* magazine, a more generous practice has prevailed. When the novella "Waiting for the Earthquake" by Robert Silverberg appeared in volume two because it was too long for the parent magazine, a fortuitous precedent was set—and once set, expanded. Henceforth, this series would include as many original works as were available and consistent with *Omni* quality. And how very high that quality is can be gauged by the stories in the following section.

First off is "The Touch" by Gregory Benford. It is not a message piece but rather an entertainment—an engrossing, chilling extrapolation of the current video-game phenomenon. Tron, Donkey Kong, Defender are small challenges compared to the game played by Benford's hero. Interfaced with a vast computer network this game learns, reasons, intrigues. As to the game's outcome—nothing short of startling.

Another entertainment is "The Lost Secret" in which Laurence Janifer resurrects the shrewd, wisecracking character Gerald Knave, who is familiar to many from Janifer's novels *Survivor* and *Knave in Hand*.

The publication of a short story by William Tenn (pseudonym of Philip Klass) is a noteworthy event not only because it is a powerful allegorical piece with a message very much for our time, but because its author just hasn't been publishing much in more than a decade. As William Tenn he began publishing science fiction in the mid-1940s and during the next twenty years published six collections of stories and two novels—*Of Men and Monsters* and *A Lamp for Medusa*. He has been known primarily as a satirist but there is nothing funny about his contribution, "There Were People on Bikini, There Were People on Attu."

In "Village of the Chosen," an imaginative story, lightly seasoned with humor, Alan Dean Foster creates a weary journalist who happens upon an anomalously exotic woman. Not quite believing his eyes, he pursues her across the wastes of northern Somalia. What happens then is an answer to one of the world's age-old problems—an answer, you might say, that gets under the skin.



THE TOUCH

BY GREGORY BENFORD

*He had always
outwitted the Game's
electronic brain.
But now the stakes
were higher . . . and the
machine was smarter*

PAINTING BY
MICHEL HENRICOT

Today, at work, he thought of the Game incessantly. He had been playing it for some years now. At first, he had sought mere mild entertainment. There were, of course, the electronic games that one saw in public places—pitiful things, a few moments of shallow amusement bought with a quarter. That was as far as

most people went—or could go, given their skills. He had tried those numbing, repetitive contests and quickly abandoned them. They rewarded quick motor skills and elementary tactical sense, but were painfully limited. Nothing like the Game. He had a business meeting in the morning; it dragged unmercifully. Then came lunch

with some business associates. They were confident, seasoned fellows, their seamed faces at ease. As they discussed recent events, he thought mildly that politics was the intelligent man's weather: an inexhaustible subject, forever new and forever purposeless. He studied the brown liver spots on his hands and said nothing.

He found their talk of money matters kept drifting in and out of his attention, dreamlike, as if their numbers and analyses were unreal and his memory of the Game was concrete.

That afternoon he lost track entirely during a conference with his own lawyer. The man looked puzzled when they parted.

He left early and went directly home. There was a light supper; he made polite, bland conversation with his lady but introduced no fresh topics on his own. As soon as was seemly, he remarked on his fatigue and went to his study.

He settled into his favorite leather armchair, pulling the massive board to within easy reach. The display screen nearly obscured the view out the wide windows. The rich lawn beyond was a vibrant yellow-green swath. Birds trilled their twilight calls among the trees that marched down to the river. Dogs romped near the gate.

He sat with his back to the study door, to discourage anyone who might accidentally enter from striking up a conversation. He had a fresh drink at his side. His mind was alert.

The Game began. He lounged back, making his first moves, knowing at this stage he had ample time. The tranquility of his study made immersion in the growing complexities easy, and heightened even the simple victories of the opening contests. He never had difficulty at this stage any longer.

It was very much like learning the characters and setting in a novel. Each time the Game featured different cultures, different assumptions about the importance of wealth, of power, of love, of life itself. Each Game was fresh. The pitiful electronic games that the public played were monotonous to him. In the decades since their introduction, the public amusements had improved somewhat, but they were inevitably dominated and limited by their audience—mostly adolescents who had the time to play, but not the sophistication to demand anything better.

Tonight the scheme was particularly engrossing. The social matrix was modified Late Marxist, with class divisions reemerging

ing. He played a young man, restive and ambitious—his customary choice.

In the first challenge he had to maneuver himself into the Party apparatus. Simple enough. There were impediments, of course. At the Peoples' Training Camp the physical challenges translated into quick, deft motions on the board. He learned to excel at single combat, neatly setting up his opponents in the Maze Delay and then—*touch*—one button, pressed at the right instant, did them in.

He secured a good middle-level post. For a young man he was doing quite well.

Then he became involved with Lisa, the mistress of a Regional Commissioner. Lust drove him—the Game knew his likes by now, and the images of Lisa held his eyes even when he knew he should be absorbing other information from the board. Her face was a composition of serene curves, and her smooth skin glowed.

He had to keep the affair secret. The Commissioner was known as jealous and vindictive; the man had learned of Lisa's earlier affairs and had adroitly framed each of her past lovers for offenses against the state. Most of them had vanished in mysterious circumstances.

Dusk darkened into night outside as he felt his way through this society. There were advantages he knew from experience—some black marketing here, a neat dodge there: a controversial report filed at the right moment, which forced his immediate superior to resign.

The Game was expensive, and that, too, enhanced his enjoyment. The Game was as intelligent as a human—perhaps more so—within its tight, circumscribed universe. Huge computer resources hummed to match his mental agility. He stretched leisurely in the armchair, feeling the warm caress of worn leather, languidly letting the study slip away, entering the Game more deeply with each move he made.

Touch—he moved up in the system.

Touch—and he made contact with some members in the Opposition.

Timing, that was it. A moment too soon, and the flow of events across the board would unmask his moves, make his intentions obvious. Too late, and a missed opportunity would be picked up by an underling, gnawing away his position.

Much of this was displayed in moving patterns of crystalline colors, in currents of probability. His decisions—*touch*—came quickly. Tactics. Maneuver. He felt himself skimming over rapids, attention flicking from

point to point on the board, sizing up each maneuver—moving, always moving.

Tonight the Game was better than ever. It presented him with problems at work, intrigues of Party politics, chances for black market gains. Risky, but inventive.

He could lose at any moment. But he didn't. No matter how many moves the Game thought ahead, he anticipated. There was always an out, a way to gain, or at least to avoid defeat. That was the one rule: there must be a solution.

At some points the Game was slower than usual. He knew this was because his skill was matching the ability of the entire system. The Game had to simulate life in all its complexity, and provide patterns of play not used before.

Any sufficiently complex network comes, in time, to seem like an independent entity. It was helpful to think of it as sentient. The intricate computer linkages had a personality of their own, and they did not like to lose. Through the years he liked to think a relationship had formed between himself and the constantly improving computer net. They had sharpened each other's wits.

Now he was straining it to the limit. When that limit was passed, he could win. And tonight he knew he would.

He met Lisa at an apartment he rented under a false name, for that purpose alone. Their nights together inflamed his imagination. Leaving the apartment at sunrise, however, he saw that he was being tailed.

There were several explanations. Someone in the police, perhaps. A leak in the Opposition?

Or an underling, trying to uncover some scrap of scandal? Possibly.

Here was a place to be deft, subtle. Just a touch...

He laid traps for these two eventualities.

Nothing happened.

He continued meeting Lisa, as often as she could arrange to slip away from the Commissioner. The man often kept her at his country estate, waiting until he had time for her.

She got away to the city as often as possible. Their arrangements were elaborate and as secure as his years of experience could make them.

Still, there were more signs. He tended to his growing personal empire, his network of informants, his associations with those whom he could help and who would be willing to return the favor.

All this he had done before in earlier games. But this time, tonight—he had to

glance up at the black windows to remind himself—there were undercurrents he could barely sense: subtle shifts, pivots, flows of money and power that he did not understand.

He was oblivious now. He did not notice the gathering chill from the great windows, or even feel the warm, familiar leather. He was fully alive, his prickly instincts alert for warning nuances in his work, in his customary social relations, in everyday detail.

A singing vibrancy gripped him and the years of routine fell away. The Game was exciting itself tonight. He could sense its brooding intelligence behind the board, feeling him out, retreating when he lunged, never giving itself away. Patient.

The computers had a style just as did he. The Game avoided the obvious, brutal methods. It usually let him run a given tactic for a while, studying it, before adroitly defecting it. The Game favored responses that turned the logic of a strategy back upon itself. Often it seemed to be playful, ingenious, as if to say, *Have you considered it this way?*

It was Lisa who noticed the small error. She recognized one of the Commissioner's cars parked in the distance, a man sitting at the wheel. The man was not looking at the two of them on the balcony above, but that did not matter. Lisa had met the man only in passing once before, but she had a remarkable memory for faces. The Commissioner had probably thought using him was a negligible risk.

Fear was part of the Game as well. It would have been simple to abandon Lisa, to back away and try another path to success. After all, there were many women. But by now he was linked to her in ways he could not describe even to himself. To sink away, losing face when confronted by the electronic intelligence behind the Game—

No. He began playing with great speed, nimbly repeating patterns of the past.

It was important to appear unafraid. To continue using tactics that had his usual style. To give no hint of his preparations.

He had to eliminate the Commissioner. The brittle intelligence within the Game would anticipate that, though probably it would not seem a likely move. His persona style ran more to the gradual techniques—a slow piling up of advantages, until the moment of resolution came.

Therefore, do the opposite. Instead of carefully marshaling resources, strike swiftly, boldly, in a way uncharacteristic of

his usual methods. But use the computer's expectations against it. Seem to be following a customary pattern. Carry on a series of slower moves, moves that the Game would expect.

He set about constructing a reasonably devious plot, involving a dozen officials. It aimed at implicating the Commissioner in treasonous securities exchanges with a nearby country. He had used a similar device before with great success.

Beneath this he planned a subplot. It had to involve a minimum of people. Lisa was the only one he could trust. His style was a way to use conventional pathways so the subplot had to be swift and daring. *Touch.*

Their paths intersected at twilight, at an inn in the countryside. He had abandoned his own auto on the other side of the city, taken a bus, then a train. Lisa had just come from the Commissioner's estate.

She left the pyramid-shaped thing on a table in the foyer, keeping her eyes straight ahead, and then went in to dinner. She did not so much as glance at him. The timing was perfect. He panned the pyramid on his way out, a moment later.

The man with Lisa, the Commissioner's usual guard for her, stayed in his car reading a newspaper. She was meeting friends for dinner and he would be out of place. The man did not even look up as a shadow moved from the side door and into the trees nearby.

He ran the two kilometers through dense woodland as dusk became night. Branches scratched his face. An owl hooted at him, but there was no sign of detection. Panting, he thought of Lisa dining, taking her time, extending the interval until the pyramid-key would be needed to readmit her to the estate. He remembered her black hair, the high arch of her cheekbones, the hypnotic passion of her.

He used the pyramid-key to disarm the detectors. In the blackness he had only starlight and the remembered locations of the alarm system monitors to guide him. He recognized the small hill near the river and ran around it, keeping in cover.

There was the line of trees leading to the great house. The downstairs rooms were not supposed to be in use, and indeed, as she had said, they were dark.

He used the pyramid-key at the gate again. It slid open silently.

He went up the driveway, avoiding the gravel, and around to the back. The kitchen door yielded. No one about. Through a side

room, where silverware awaited polishing. Turn left. Yes—the big dining room. Then a hallway lined with scowling portraits. Lush carpeting that led to a stairway. His footsteps made no sound going up.

He took out the gun. Pressed against flesh, it delivered a nerve poison. Death was swift and untraceable.

Turn here to the left. A closed door. From under it yellowish light seeped. No sound from within.

He turned the knob slowly. Well oiled, as she had arranged. The latch slid free.

Now he moved quickly. The images came at him in a rush.

A brown armchair. Books lining the study. Large windows, showing the blackness outside. The head of the older man, white-haired, not resting back against the leather but instead tilted forward, concentrating on the board before him, the wrinkled neck exposed, the face intent and pensive, focused as if waiting for—

Touch.

Gregory Benford, now in his early forties is both an accomplished scientist and a celebrated writer of science fiction. He earned his doctorate in physics from the University of California where he is now a full professor at the Irvine campus. And as a scientist he has published some fifty papers on such subjects as high-energy astrophysics, pulsars, quasars and violent extragalactic events. As a writer of science fiction he is noted for his well-plotted, carefully written, elegant prose. Recognition of his exceptional achievement in science fiction came in 1981 when he not only won a Nebula Award for his novel Timescape, but when the name "Timescape" itself was chosen by the publishing house of Simon and Schuster for its new line of science fiction paperbacks. Earlier novels include If the Stars are Gods (co-authored with Gordon Ecklund), Deeper Than the Darkness and In the Ocean of Night. These works and most of his short stories are based on Benford's favorite themes—genetic engineering, theology, deep-space exploration, alien worlds and future weaponry. In large part these themes are evident in the two of his stories—"A Hiss of Dragon" (co-written with Marc Laidlaw) and "Dark Sanctuary"—already anthologized in The Best of Omni Science Fiction series. Significantly perhaps, since it touches on none of his usual motifs, the never before-published Benford story in this volume may mark a new departure in his writing career.



THE LOST SECRET

*How Gerald Knave makes
a killing in
the immortality racket*

BY LAURENCE M. JANIFER

He said his name was Duncan Harrison and he insisted on buying me another drink. I told him it didn't matter; he had only upset my gimlet at the bar, it could have happened to anybody, and just forget it. "But I feel an obligation," he said. "I'm terribly sorry—a little clumsy this evening—but I have a great deal on my mind." Which is when he began to interest me, strangely.

I was in the Regency Inn, NA Continent, Earth, which is a little showy and has all-live service, so an all-live bartender brought me a new gimlet and put another Thing in front of my new friend. It was blue and it had foam on it, and he didn't identify it and God knows I didn't ask. I said, merely and mildly "Thanks," and Harrison raised his Thing and gave me a nervous little smile over the rim of it.

Duncan Harrison: five feet five—maybe one hundred and twenty pounds, expensive black-silk jumper with the usual fittings, hair a little thin on top, and one helluva earnest, terribly honest expression behind his horn-rims.

"Not at all," he said. "It was completely my fault, Mr. —" He hesitated. "By the way," he said, "I don't know your name."

"Knave," I said. "Gerald Knave." I was out of business cards—one of the reasons I was staying in the Home Worlds a little longer than usual was to get some more printed up with Real Earth quality and expense attached—but I wouldn't have given him one if I'd had ten thousand. *Gerald Knave Survivor* looks fine on a card, but if you hand the card out, you are buying yourself a lot of explanation time, and I wasn't in the mood.

Besides, as I've said, this Harrison type interested me. And I had the very strong feeling that a word like *Survivor* might be a word he understood, and that understanding might make him nervous. And I knew, right off, that I didn't want him nervous. I wanted him calm, cool, assured, and entirely certain that he was in total control of the situation.

PAINTING BY JULIA TURCHUK

So I stopped and smiled back at him, and waited to find out what the situation was going to be. We took a sip apiece and Harrison said, nicely casual: "Why not sit at a table if you don't mind? You look like an unusual sort of man, Mr. Knave."

It's not a bad opening. When he looked round, spotted an empty table in a corner some distance from anyone else, grabbed his Thing, and headed for it, I followed right along, porting the gimlet.

I was wearing a fairly expensive outfit and I let my expression and attitude change a little to confirm what the outfit said. I was all over innocence and light-hearted wealth. When we sat down, I took up his opening: "What's unusual about me?"

Well—"He hesitated, frowning. Trying to sum it all up. 'It's really just an impression I get. But, when you've been around as long as I have—' Another hesitation, while a small shadow of secret satisfaction crossed his face and was allowed to disappear. "Well, you learn to depend on such impressions. You're—ah—reasonably successful in the world's terms. Mr. Knave—but a shrewd sort of man to deal with; I'd say that at once. However, in your own terms..." He let it trail off and gave me a fairly effective shrug.

"In my own terms?" I said. Surprised, but wary.

He took another sip of that damned blue Thing. "In your own terms, Mr. Knave, you're not satisfied—not really. You're still looking for something—still searching—"

My surprise became open astonishment. "How did you know that?" I said, reminding myself, for God's sake, not to overdo it.

He tried the smile again. He was very good at it. "As I say," he told me, "when you've been around as long as I have, Mr. Knave—"

Jerry, I said. "Please. And you don't look so very old—I'd say forty-five, at the outside." An honest count would have made it fifty; I felt it was in character—the character I was still busily assuming—to shade it a little for him.

Jerry then, he said. The same smile, with a little of his secret-satisfaction bit added in. "What would you say if I told you I was older than forty-five—very much older?"

I'd fed him the right cue line. My face stayed innocent, astonished, and friendly—but still a little wary. "What I'd say, Mr. Harrison—" I started.

"Duncan," he said. He didn't push too

hard. He really was very good. At least, a good bit better than average.

It got him my very best nervous smile. Duncan, then, I said, to even us up. "I'd say you were in, well, just remarkable health. If you're really much older than forty-five—well, Duncan, I just wouldn't believe it."

He nodded soberly. "That's our protection, you see," he said. "Nobody would believe it. Oh, everyone talks about it—you must have heard some idle chatter—but nobody knows that it's quite real. It actually exists, it's been found." Secret satisfaction, small smile. The only people who do know, you see, are the ones who've had it—and of course the ones who become candidates for it."

"Candidates?" I said. "For what? It seemed like a good idea to give him the chance to make his full pitch. If I were a little slow to catch on, he might relax a bit more."

"For immortality," he said, and looked around as if to spot anyone listening. "Nobody was listening. The lost secret of the Ancients," he went on, "Immortality."

As he'd told me, I hadn't become successful without being a little shrewd. I trotted out some shrewdness. "Now wait a minute—" I said.

"Oh, I know it sounds like a 3V thriller," he said. He looked around some more. "It's a legend, after all, and some people still believe that it doesn't exist. That the secret of immortality was something the Ancients didn't have time to discover, back before the Clean Slate War—"

Sure I've heard talk," I said. "Everybody has. But—well, you said it yourself—it's a legend. And only a legend. Good God, man, if it were real—"

"Yes," he said. "If it were real. Concentrate on that for a minute. Perhaps you'll see why we take great care to maintain it as a legend."

So I sat there, I hadn't been looking for this Duncan Harrison—or for anybody. I'd just dropped in for a drink or two. But I had every intention of continuing the acquaintance very close by, for a while.

Therefore, after a decent interval, and most of the gimlet, I allowed the light of understanding to dawn on my eager face. "You mean—" I said, with all the awe I could muster. "You mean it wouldn't be for everybody?"

That brought from him a big satisfied smile. "I knew I was right about you," he said. "You're quick. You see the point at

once. It simply can't be for everybody. Why, the Home Worlds are overcrowded as things stand, only three hundred years after the Clean Slate War. And there aren't enough Frontier planets to take care of the population we'd have—if nobody ever died. Given just one child per couple every twenty years..." The shrug again.

"Of course," I said. "It would make sense. But you're telling me—"

"I'm telling you," he said, very solemnly, "that I am one hundred and thirty years old. A comparative newcomer. After the reconstructing archaeologists found the Ancients' secret—found it, and were bright enough to keep it secret, never to mention it in any public report—a few rules for enlisting new members were hammered out. Luckily," he told me with a modest smile good enough to add to my collection of modest smiles, "I was judged fit to pass."

It seemed time to display a little actual thought. "But if they had it before the war," I said, "then there must be people even older than you—people born before the beginning of the twenty-first century. The ones who got the formula before the war, and managed to survive through it."

"There are indeed," he said. "I've met one, though he isn't on Earth now. But I doubt that there are very many, Jerry. After a—"

"After all," I cut in, "it isn't magic. Whatever it does, this formula, it wouldn't be proof against a fusion bomb. I suppose—or against massive radiation damage."

He was positively beaming at me. "I knew you were quick," he said. "It's a combination of elements plus a radiation treatment, meant to encourage cellular regeneration. Even if I were shot, say, I might regenerate quickly enough to stay alive. But you're quite right. A fusion bomb wouldn't be survivable, and massive fallout would probably be too much for the regenerative faculties. Not that we have those worries nowadays, not with proper caution."

He stopped. He was waiting for my next line, so I gave it to him. "But why are you telling me all this?" I said, displaying a proper degree of my shrewd wariness. "After all—"

"I'm telling you, Jerry," he said, "because I believe you can pass inspection." The satisfied beam gave way to so much earnestness again. "Frankly, I'm sure of it, and I haven't been wrong about so important a belief in—at least ninety years. Our meeting was a most happy accident."

'It certainly was,' I said fervently. I meant it, too, for a change. Most sincerely.

"In fact," he was saying, "I want you to meet our Dr. Royce. You see, Jerry, no one member of our—ah—group can admit a new candidate. At least two must agree, and Royce, the dear chap, happens to be not only on Earth, but right here in the capital, right now."

I stared at him as if he'd turned into an ostrich. "You mean—if you and this—this Dr. Royce—agree on me..."

He nodded very slowly. "You'll be given the formula at once—if possible," he said. "A drink, with instructions for concocting it again if you must, though we have centers on several planets, and you'll be provided with a list. You'll need a refresher dose of the formula every twenty years or so. The radiation treatment is required only once."

"You mean that's all there is to it?" I said, maintaining the stare.

"That's all," he said, with a fine, slow casual smile. "Except for the dues of course, which are payable every twenty years, when you get your new dose. The money goes toward supporting those centers, as well as the plantations where we grow what we require for the formula. You'll be told where those are, too, of course." He stopped for a second or so, and then added, "And the dues can be waived, naturally, in cases of hardship."

I swear, it hurt him even to say that. If he'd meant it, it might have killed him. But I let it pass. "No problem there," I said, heartily. "As you deduced, I'm quite successful—in the world's terms. Dues? Why, who wouldn't pay every cent he could scrape up for..."

"Keep your voice down," he snapped. It was a very good snap, testy, authoritative, anxious. I appreciated talent of all sorts.

So I said, "Oh... of course," in a whisper, and looked frightened, and peered around. The inn wasn't crowded, at its prices it seldom is. We were a fair distance from the nearest visible human being. But can you give me any idea when I might—might meet your Dr. Royce?

"I thought you'd be impatient," he said. "Most successful men have that sort of drive. They feel that there's never enough time." He gave me a forgiving smile for having raised my voice, or for being impatient, or both. "Now, of course, there will be time enough for everything."

I went on being frightened. "There might be—if I pass," I said hopefully.

The smile became a positive sunburst. Harrison had about half a man's weight, and three men's charm. "Don't worry about a thing," he told me. "Believe me, you're as good a candidate as I've ever seen." And, after the slightest pause, "By the way, are you staying here?"

"The Regency? No," I said truthfully. I've rented my own apartment, downtown. I find it more convenient when I must be in the city. In fact, I was just here to begin killing an evening. All true within limits. I did have an appointment, a bit later, but it was breakable, she was lovely, but she was also understanding. And I saw no particular harm in forcing my new friend's pace.

He frowned in thought, an effect not quite as good as his testy snap had been. "Well, since you have the evening free," he said after a time, "and Dr. Royce is in the city, I suppose I go and see what can be arranged?"

"By all means," I said, and he nodded and left me.

I sat there finishing my gimlet. It had been a long time since I'd run into the immortality racket—the lost art of cellular regeneration, complete with nice high dues that had been located among surviving papers or tapes of the pre-Space, pre-Clean State-

War human race. I'd almost thought of it as dead, which would have been a shame—a good con is a work of art—and it's nice to know that even the old numbers are still around. And so far, good old Duncan Harrison was paying everything according to the script.

And—who knows?—maybe there was such a thing back in the misty twentieth century. Cellular regeneration, and anti-gravity; the Ancients were supposed to have had both. Nobody knows for sure, of course, and the chances are that nobody ever will. Two hundred years of reconstructive archaeology is a helluva lot of hunting, and anything that hasn't turned up probably won't.

I entertained myself with thoughts like that until, after eight or ten minutes, Duncan came busting back in. I snapped to my feet at once. Eager? Hell, I was practically straining at the leash.

He was beaming again. "We're in luck!" he told me. "If you can be here tonight at ten o'clock—"

"Here?" I said. "In the inn?"

"Dr. Royce's room," he said. "He has digs here at the Regency—finds it a change from lab work. Imagine." He gave me the room number, and I promised to be there.



"And Jerry," he said. "I'd advise—well, the formula's rather delicate. The drinking you've already done won't hurt matters, but no more between now and ten."

It was a solid, convincing touch. "Of course," I said. "No trouble at all."

"Very well then. I'll expect you at ten. I want to tell Dr. Royce about you, of course."

"Of course," I said.

He gave me his biggest, brightest smile and shook his hand. He had a firm, honest handclasp.

They always do.

I made two calls. One was to my appointment, who was understanding. When I explained what was going forward, she was overjoyed and wanted to pitch in and help, but I couldn't find a slot for her. She didn't much like that, but she did accept it at last, with my promise that she'd be the first to be tapped when any little jobbie came along that called for the Eternal Female. She owns a fine spirit of fun, which is one reason she was my appointment that night in the first place.

Then I went on home and discovered that I'd been inspired. Nothing like the prospect of immortality to liven up a man. I began cooking the best dinner I'd eaten in several months, found a good wine to go with it, and then, regretfully, put the wine back into the rack. If you're going to do a thing, do it right.

I did compensate a little, with a pot of gunpowder green tea after dinner. Away back, two or three centuries before the Clean Slate War, there had been talk that the stuff was a hallucinogen. It isn't, as far as I know, but I keep hoping. And the love y stuff is one of my better cravings.

I washed dishes, thought about a little light dusting, and decided there wasn't time. Some people collect stamps and some ski. Me, I'm a housekeeper by avocation. I've got a Totum and a couple of small Robbins saved to it, but I do for myself unless I feel depressed or turn out to be just too damned busy. That night, I turned up busy besides, the apartment really didn't need it.

And then it was nine-thirty. Time to head back to the Regency.

Dr. Royce was awfully good for the part. At ten o'clock on the nose, he flung the door open in response to my knock and barked at me. "Yes? What's this? Who are you, boy?"

I took myself aback, about six inches

"My name is Gerald Knave," I said. "Mr. Harrison."

He actually snorted, emitting a rare sound and a surprisingly unpleasant one. "Oh, yes, Duncan'd mention that," he said. "But we've a great deal on my mind just now. I'm afraid it's quite impossible. Perhaps some other time. A few months, possibly a year. I'm sorry, Mr. Erlum, but—"

Stepping back, I said, "But—" and Harrison came in right on cue.

"Now, Carlos," he said soothingly. "We've just got to make the time. We don't find a new candidate every day, you know."

"Hmpf," Dr. Royce said. "I am not at all convinced—"

"But I've told you."

"Yes, yes, Duncan," he signed. "I know. There was a long pause, during which I tried looking eager, uncertain, nervous, and one part irritated to keep up the successful, shrewdly wary, man-of-the-world flavor. "Well," the good doctor said at last, "come in, sir. I suppose we shall have to speak with you at last. Duncan is simply not given to such unusual fits of—ah—enthusiasm." He stepped back from the doorway and I went in.

As I say awfully good for the part. He wasn't quite up to my own six feet, but he'd have dressed out a good bit heavier than my one-seventy-five or so. White hair in a thick shock, beetling eyebrows, and a square, choeric face; an ill-fitted jumper covered with odd-experiment stains and the like, and a voice like a pipe organ with a slight case of asthma, set to bombard solid low and a trifle wheezy. No glasses by the way: a good touch. You expect a "Dr. Royce" to be wearing eyeglasses of some sort, and their absence makes the effect a good deal stronger. He's not your expectable 3V doctor type, so he must be real.

In any case, I was ready and, by God, even panting to be convinced. I stepped in and looked round, wondering idly how much my dues payment was going to be. Judging from Royce's room, it would be fairly large.

The Regency is by no means the poshest of hotels, but it is by no means a dog-eat-medium-luxury: a lot of people traveling on business, a few newlywed couples, a little of this and that, and a lot of top-class convention business. An obvious place, when I came to think about it, for people like Harrison and Royce to trolly-buses.

And Royce had one of the better rooms—

a single, but a big one, a double bed, mirrors here and there, an immense dresser that looked so much like real wood it might have been, a few chairs, one closet door, one door to the obvious bath.

And of course the Apparatus. One whole corner of the place looked like a set for a wildly extravagant Mad Scientist show. Tubes and bottles, dials and meters and you name it, all arranged on two tables and part of the floor. It was very impressive and quite a lot of the stuff was at work—bubbling or fuming mostly. Its basic odor was banana mixed with rubbing alcohol, just odd enough to be convincing.

Harrison came forward to meet me. "Jerry," he said. "Good to see you." He gave him a grin like a weak highball, two-thirds neutral irritation and one-third wry. "Oh, Carlos," he said, and waved a forgiving sort of hand. "You'll have to excuse him. He's a good deal younger than I. He gets upset more easily."

"Upset?" Royce said, still the choeric mad scientist. "I am not upset. But, my dear Duncan, we know nothing about this man. He might be anyone. He might be some plausible fool. What we have is of great value, you know."

Of course they had done their checking, and they'd found since I'd last seen good old Duncan, what I wanted them to find.

Legitimate parties checking on me get legitimate answers. These two charming people wouldn't have known the right questions, or the order in which to ask them. My files are a matter of public record as far as any citizens are, but there are two sets.

Governments need Survivors once in a while, and they do tend to appreciate the work, if you bring it to their attention loudly enough. Once in a while, I can make something out of such gratitude, though it seldom turns out to be money. I can't touch any other listing, but I can just nudge my own.

I'd depended on the checking. They'd showed admirable attention to detail, after all—that bit about Royce being younger than Harrison, for instance, when he looked easily ten years older. All in all, they were just short of the top bracket.

Royce still gruff and still obviously reluctant—you never sell the mark, you let him buy—asked me to submit to some questions, and I found a chair and sat down. The inquisition was predictable, what I do for a living and how well I do at it were the central points of interest, though the scene

was gussied up with a fair number of psychological-type queries. "Which would you rather be, an ostrich or a penguin?"—that sort of thing.

They got the answers that fitted the records they'd tapped, the ones that have me in investments and doing well in a somewhat-above-medium range. The ones that have me never setting foot off the planet, for that matter.

Royce was quite convincingly reluctant, which meant that it took him an hour of this sort of guff to become convincingly convinced. I occupied myself, while reeling out answers and attitudes (I chose the penguin, if you care—being in character), with trying to guess the figure they had me pegged for.

"The radiation treatment will be tomorrow," Royce said at last, a little regretfully. I thought, since I'd let it be known that I could lay my hands on a fair lot of coarse cash more or less instantly. But I'd figured on the delay, putting the mark on the send gives him a chance to develop even more eagerness, and gives the happy con men a final chance to check on any nosy unbought, law types. "And I must warn you," he went on, "that the dues are high. Maintaining our plantations, our centers, requires a good deal of money in these crowded days."

"Some day soon," Harrison said, "we should simply move—all of us in the group—to our own planet. A planet of immortal beings . . ."

A wondrous thought. "Money doesn't matter," I snapped, lying in my teeth. "What's money, if I can use it to buy—well to buy life with?"

"Exactly," friend Duncan told me, smiling paternally. "And, as you will discover, your—ah—new perspective will be a great help in making more money."

I nodded, judiciously. "I can see how that might be," I said. "But, well, what are the dues?" I asked that one just as casually as I could.

"Five hundred thousand dollars," my dear friend said, in a perfectly even voice.

And, damn it, I'd lost my bet. I'd figured them for seven-fifty.

It developed that I was to meet them at the radiation center at ten-thirty in the morning. I got the address, and a caution not to mention the Secret to a single soul.

"Of course not!" I said, wounded at their lack of faith. "I'll tell my bank—well, I'll tell them something. Something quite plausi-

ble, you know. But as for this—of course not."

After a few more seconds of this-and-that chat, the door shut leaving me back in the corridor.

Oh, I nearly forgot to mention that I'd had my formula. It was sort of a deep yellow with purple swirls, and it fizzed a bit. Six ounces, more or less. It tasted like plain soda mixed with oregano, a brand new effect for my palate, and not one I was anxious to repeat.

I didn't think the stuff could hurt me any. After all, they wanted me in the pink of condition in the morning. After that they'd be gone, and it wouldn't matter, and practitioners of the large con tend to attacks of nervousness at the thought of actually hurting someone—physically.

Maybe, I thought, it would be a hallucinogen when it mixed with the gunpowder tea. I remembered something about oregano. Or marijuana. Or something of the sort. LSD? DNA? PreSpace bourbon?

No such luck. But the game was fun enough on its own, I didn't need stimulants. At any rate, I didn't need chemicals.

I checked the time, once I was safely out and away: nearly midnight. There'd been

more talk and filler than I'd realized. However, I could still make a call . . .

My previous appointment, I was informed, would dearly love to hear how matters were coming along, and why didn't I drift along to her place and tell her all?

Why not? I decided.

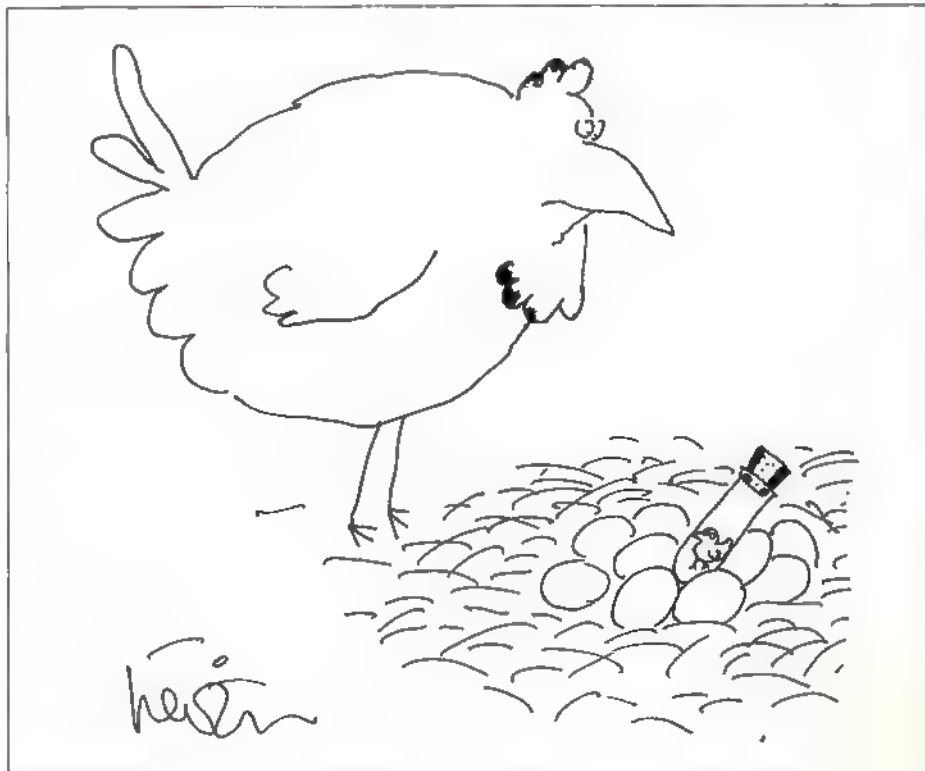
And she was delighted. And so was I.

The place turned out to be a run-down sort of building near the edge of the city which was disappointing. But apparently they couldn't run their radiation whatchit off the hotel's power. And the place-to-place gimmick is always a good idea in any case; it gives the mark the impression that he's involved with a large outfit, with plantations, maybe, just about everywhere.

As instructed: a white plastic door without identification, on the second floor. Friend Duncan had said: "We don't advertise ourselves, of course." Of course. Maybe they'd just found a vacant spot and weren't even paying rent.

Dr. Royce answered my knock, looking just as testy as ever. He let me in without a word.

It was a big, bare room with a large, white Something in the center. The Something looked a little like a truly ancient X-ray ma-



chine crossed with a gigantic 3V editor. Or a silent-movie editor to keep everything in the same generation. It had a wooden chair set between two large screens, a big light above the screens, and a great many dials and meters. Loving care, two or three hours of it had gone into setting it up.

Harrison was standing next to the Something "Ready?" he asked.

I gave him my very best nervous but-courageous smile. "You mean—this is it?" I said, quavering just a trifle.

He looked at me reassuringly. Just sit down, Jerry, he said. "Dr. Royce will give you the treatment. It won't hurt a bit, I promise you."

I headed for the chair. Halfway along, I stopped and said, "Oh, there is one thing." "What is it?" Royce asked from behind me, even more testily.

"The dues," said apologetically, "as you said—in cash—"

"Since the transaction must be quite secret," Harrison said.

"Certainly," said
stood there. I fished in an inside pocket. I began to bring out a large envelope full of perfectly real money.

Royce was now at my side. Harrison was in front of me, maybe four steps away.

I had little trouble getting the envelope out of my pocket.

And there was a knock on the door. Harrison and Royce stood like statues, silent, not breathing. After what seemed to be several years, the knock was repeated. "They must be looking for someone else," Harrison said.

"Certainly," Royce said, with great calm. "Now, to continue—" His hand was out, was holding the envelope by then almost carelessly. Not quite.

The knock came again. A voice said, "Dr. Royce? Dr. Carlos Royce?"

He had the grand manner. He turned to face the door without a tremor. "Who is that?" he said in an even voice.

Harrison was a little pale. I pretended not to notice.

A group member, the voice said. A nice, young tenor. "I don't know you—but radiation treatment shouldn't be necessary, or desirable, if the subject is under sixty-three standard years of age. Please, let me in."

Absentmindedly I slipped the envelope halfway back into that inside pocket. Harrison was staring at it. Royce stood still, his face a gaping mask of indecision, but after a while what the hell could he do? Ignoring the voice wouldn't make it go away.

What if the voice belonged to a police officer who hadn't somehow been squared away and was ready, by now, to beam his damned way in?

Royce could open the door. Or cut his throat with something or other. So he opened the door.

The kid outside looked just over twenty. He gave the room one comprehensive glance. Whatever he was, he wasn't law.

"I overheard the talk," he said. "Yesterday, in the Regency Inn. And, of course, had to check up later. Privately assure you. This radiation treatment."

You couldn't have overheard," Harrison said. "You weren't there."

The boy grinned. "You simply didn't notice me. People don't when I don't want them to. It's a talent one can develop. You've got more than the rudiments of it as you should have. And my hearing, of course, is extraordinarily acute. It gets that way after three hundred and twelve years of treatments."

Royce was still speechless. The grand manner had carried him as far as it could. Harrison said, "Three—hundred—and—"

"Of course," the boy said. "You're not members I recognize, and I don't know what tests you've given this man. He pointed at me in an offhand way, and I shrank a little. 'As to all this about radiation treatments—please do you mind if I check your basic formula?'"

"I—we don't have the—the—" Harrison took a deep, deep swallow. "We gave it to him—last—night—"

The boy nodded. I said, helpfully, sounding both puzzled and halfway scared. "I could describe it, anyhow." He nodded again. I described it. Even unto the damned oregano.

"But that must be a wrong!" the boy said. "Sir—Mr. Harrison—don't understand."

"That's the formula I drank," I said.

"Well," the boy said. He shut the door and stood against it, looking thoughtfully at the three of us. "don't see how. This can't be the real thing at all."

Harrison said fitfully, "But—perhaps we—you might—"

The boy's face went hard.

"You see," he said softly, "there were a few survivors, after the war. Not many. Development only came in 1990. And it was a bad time. A bad time." His face went quite still, and his eyes shut. Nobody else moved or spoke. "But there were a few. And there are groups I don't know of, so

assumed it could happen that—"

"This is another formula," Harrison said. "Separate lines of development—He was recovering a little."

"No, it isn't possible," the boy said. "Any thing with a fizz—and yellow—no such drink could have a regenerative effect. The number of compounds which would have such qualities is derivable, of course. Dr. Royce, you must know of many."

Dr. Royce made a sound that might have turned into speech if we had all given it an hour or so instead, but in "But if it isn't real—"

"You're doubting me, of course," the boy said. "Well, is there any one of you with official connections?"

Royce made his sound again, and then echoed, "With official—"

The boy nodded. "Oh, not a law agency. Believe me. But you see, the way most of us do manage is to live a life for sixty or seventy years, aging with makeup and some special ads, and then we arrange to 'die' one way or another and start again somewhere else, at our 'normal' ages. As you can see, I've just begun again, and it struck me that I could disclose my 'last incarnation' to anyone who could check the identification with an official source. It might remove any doubt."

The law was still on their minds. Undoubtedly the fix was in: when it isn't, a good con will not operate. But perhaps it wasn't in far enough.

Harrison was a stuck record. But—but—but—

"You people are clearly not group members," the boy said. "And we do have to limit our numbers. But we need intelligence, audacity, inventiveness, flexibility—all of which are genetic traits. I can check for that, if you'll allow me."

Nobody thought of not allowing him. For twenty years old, he had enormous presence. The sort of presence you might expect of someone three hundred and twelve years old. Say.

He took out a small penknife and some glasses. He jabbed my finger first, then Royce's, and then the reluctant Harrison's, washing the knife with a damp cloth, smelling of disinfectant, between the jabs. He got us on the slides.

He fished in his pockets again when the knife was away and took out a small gadget with a light in it. It looked like a miniature microscope, with ambitions toward becoming an octopus some day.

"Gene patterns in every cell," he mur-

mured "These will do quite nicely."

He spent a long time staring at the three glass slides. When he looked up, he asked, "Does anyone here have official connections?"

"For what?" Harrison said. He was still pale. Royce was just bewildered, as if his partner had suddenly turned into a giant hamburger, hold the pickle.

"Fingerprint check," the boy said. "As I proposed, I'll tell you my present name, and my last one. You can get fingerprints for both, stamped over any phone that will take stats, and compare for yourselves. Your source may have blink-comparator devices, or other mechanisms that will make identification quite certain. But I must caution you to keep the motive for your curiosity to yourselves. If anyone here has . . ."

Harrison looked at Royce, and Royce returned the favor. But the boy clearly wasn't law—a fact which was, at last, sinking in.

"I might—the local police—" Royce began at last.

As I said, the fix had to be in. Royce, Harrison, and several local police officers just had to be close friends.

"Fine," the boy said. "I was afraid it might be Mr. Knave."

I said it: "Afraid?"

"Because I must tell you to leave now," he said firmly. "I don't think I have disclosed anything so vital that I must kill you. If you tell the story, you won't be believed. But, well, I'm afraid you simply do not—"

"And these men—if they aren't real—" I began.

The boy sighed. "I am sorry," he said. "But, after all, two out of three! Gene patterns are conclusive. Original flexibility . . . at that, it's a real coup! One every couple of years is closer to the average."

"Now, wait a minute," I said, but Harrison and Royce cooperated in getting me out of there. Gently, politely, and very rapidly I heard the boy say: "Of course you two will have to take new names—new identities. I think you must be used to that. But we'll help, as we always do. As for your illegal activities, we've no interest in that. We take the long view. In fact, your profession ought to be looked into. The qualities that go into such an 'invention' are, as you now know, the qualities we most require."

The door shut, leaving me on the outside. I didn't stay to listen. It didn't seem wise. I was home in half an hour.

No immortality for Gerald Knave. I desperately needed consolation. I brewed some strong, magnificent coffee, and I

made a phone call, and soon I was not alone.

She loved the coffee, of course. Most people do. It's a talent. I will try to teach anybody who wants to learn, but failure is frequent. As with any other art form, the real basics can't be taught.

He showed up a few hours later.

"They had it back in the hotel," he said. "Three hundred thousand apiece."

I shrugged. "Fair."

"Fair?" he said. "I ought to get half a million out of this one."

I shrugged again. "Chalk the rest up to entertainment. Didn't you love the mad scientist rig?"

"Mostly torn down when I got there," he said. "They were moving out, naturally. But—oh, all right—call it even." He gave me a thick cash bundle. I still had the one I'd brought along to the radiation center. I felt incredibly rich.

"Maybe next time it'll be bigger," I said.

"Maybe," he said. "I gather there'll be a next time—whenever you happen to feel like being entertained? Not that you need the money—"

"I always need the money," I said stiffly. "After all—"

"Sure," he said. "The style to which you keep trying to get accustomed . . . Well, I've got to get out of here anyhow. Got a date, and after that, I think I might head for another continent for a while. At the least—"

It sounded like a sensible idea. "Where did you tell them to go?" I asked.

"Peru, Indiana," he said. "A couple of rooms . . . registering as Royce and Harrison. Wait two weeks for contact by a group member with proper equipment. I could only give them the preliminary dose."

The dose consisted of gunpowder tea, brewed with hot peppers. I'd thought of adding oregano, but it seemed a bit too much, somehow. I had a question, but my lovely appointment got there first.

"Why Peru, Indiana?" she asked, fascinated by me, by the boy, or by the money. Probably, I told myself, by all three; she fascinated easily.

The boy shrugged at her. "Why not?" he said.

She laughed. She was still laughing when the boy left—a valued friend at twenty-three, and thank God for him.

"Tell me," she said. "Fingerprints. Not even you can tamper with someone's file, and he hasn't got your connections—"

"I did no tampering," I said. "Didn't have

to. Look, although the odds against two sets of fingerprints matching are something like twenty billion to one, there are files existing from maybe 1900 to date—files that were stored very neatly through the damned war, even—and those files include a helluva lot more than twenty billion people."

She stared. "But—"

It had been a popular word all day. "People don't realize it," I said. "Not even the police. And they won't until they tangle with a case that rubs their noses in the fact. Fingerprints are old, solid, established, standard identification. And my young friend, it seems, can be identified—accurately—as himself, and as a man who died four years ago, age eighty-seven. In Chicago, as I recall."

"Really?" she said. "I mean—legitimately?"

"Legitimately," I told her. "Believe it or not, I tripped over it by accident. I was looking into hereditary fingerprint patterns and set a small computer to pull everything matching inside a fairly close range. And this kid's file popped out. Truly a good kid, and he loves his work. He's developed into a helluva actor—I never doubted him in that room. Not that there was anything to doubt. I knew. But, clearly nobody else doubted him either for evidence of which—" I waved the money at her. Waving bundles of money at lovely women is an interesting hobby. "He's got awfully good at the thing, though of course we still need the identification as a clincher."

"But don't people ever check with one another?" she asked. "And well, if they do, and if they realize—"

I smiled, total relaxation. "They keep it secret," I said. "As requested. Damn it, I'd send them on their way convinced they were *already* immortal, if I didn't think I'd be contributing to the deaths of people who might think they could regenerate after a beam or a slug. As it is, the truth dawns on them—or something near the truth—in two weeks, maybe three. In Peru, Indiana. And after that they *really* want to keep it secret, right?"

"Right," she said, giving me back an identical smile.

"By which time," I said, "we are all somewhere else, of course. And without any need to take on any actual sort of job for a while."

She sighed and shook her lovely head. "I will be damned," she said.

"Conceivably," I said—and the rest of the day is none of your business.



THERE WERE PEOPLE ON BIKINI THERE WERE PEOPLE ON ATTU

BY WILLIAM TENN

From loudspeakers mounted on their bows, the space ships began to blare identical messages in every human language . . .

One day the Earth found itself surrounded by space ships.

These space ships were enormous and completely alien in design; they were operated by power so tremendous that their approach had not even been suspected by a single astronomer in the northern or southern hemisphere. The ships had simply materialized in uncanny multitudes all about the planet; and there they remained, with no outward signs of activity, for about twenty hours.

On Earth, naturally, there was a good deal of activity—some of it frenzied. The nations buzzed back and forth to each other, ally reaching out with moist diplomatic hand to ally, foe asking tentative, wide-eyed question of foe.

Newspapers put out extras as fast as the presses could blink, and television networks presented stammering scientists—all kinds of scientists: nuclear physicists, botanists, field archaeologists, anatomy professors—in a tumbled, bewildering succession. Aimless, ugly riots broke out, churches and revival tents overflowed with worried worshipers; the suicide rate went up sharply.

A boating party on Loch Ness swore in a group affidavit that they had been approached by a sea serpent forty-eight feet long. It informed them in impeccable English that it was a citizen of the star Arcturus and had arrived exactly two hours ago. It was pro-Labor and anti-vivisection.

Everywhere, men, women and children shaded their eyes and stared hard at those areas of the sky most distant from the sun. Peepingly, they could discern the outlines of the strange craft, hanging like so many clusters of impossibly shaped grapes. In the dark sections of Earth, the space ships glowed all night around their edges, throwing a thin network of yellow phosphorescence against the purple heavens.

People shuffled uneasily and asked their neighbors their leaders, even strangers: "What does it mean? What do they want?"

Nobody had the slightest idea.

A radio-controlled space vehicle, built to explore the moons of Mars, was sent up for a close look at the space ships. Shortly after it passed the outer limits of the atmosphere, it disappeared completely, and no trace of it was ever found again. A minute or so later, every single artificial satellite orbiting the Earth also disappeared. No explosions, no blast from a new kind of ray—just, there they all were one moment, and there they were *not* the next.

It became obvious that if the creatures in the space ships wanted to conquer Earth, to enslave or exterminate its population, there was nothing to stop them. Mankind's most powerful countermeasures would function like a fly swatter putting down a dynamite explosion.

Nonetheless, nation after nation mobilized, airmen sat tensely in jet planes that were incapable of reaching one-hundredth the height of the space ships, gun crews of anti-aircraft units piled shells near their weapons and waited for their radar operators to give them usable target instructions. IBM sites, ABM sites, all ballistic missile sites, were put on red alert. Martial law was proclaimed in Greenland, at Cape Horn, in the Andaman Islands.

At the same time, men of good will all

over Earth pointed out that the inhabitants of the space ships were probably creatures of good will. Their technology was much, much more advanced than the best that humanity had—why shouldn't their sociology be equally advanced? If their machines were better, why shouldn't their ethics be better, too? Be intelligent, the men of good will suggested earnestly; if these alien creatures had the means to come upon Earth so suddenly they could probably have overwhelmed it in the same flashing instant had they so desired. No, the men of good will decided at last, humanity had nothing to fear.

Humanity, stubbornly, continued to fear. "All those space ships. What do they want?"

There was a lot of activity in war colleges and government offices that day and night. Specialists in every field that in any way related to communications were collected by military press gangs and set to work at devices that might transmit or receive messages relative to the space ships. Radio, blinker lights, even telepathy, were tried. Nothing worked. Panic grew.

At the end of twenty hours, each space ship simultaneously disgorged five smaller craft. These floated down to the surface of the planet and, upon landing, began to blare out from loudspeakers mounted on their bows the identical message.

"Everybody off Earth!"

In Tibet, this message was blared in Tibetan; in Norway, in Norwegian; around Lake Chad, in all the numerous Chad dialects, in certain parts of the United States of America, "Everybody offen the Yurth! And naow!" The message was the same wherever the smaller craft landed, only it was spoken in the tongue and idiom peculiar to the region.

"Everybody off Earth!"

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETE TURNER

For about half an hour these words were screamed at the dumfounded humans who had gathered around the odd vessels. Then, abruptly and all over Earth at exactly the same moment, openings appeared in various parts of these ships and metallic creatures with dozens of metallic tentacles came out. These creatures, it was apparent to men still able to use their imaginations, could be nothing but robots, mechanical servants of thinking individuals in the space ships that still hovered miles upon empty hundreds of miles above the atmosphere.

The robots began to collect people.

They moved to a group of people—they moved extremely fast—and reached out with their tentacles, grasping a human gently but firmly around the waist with each one. When every tentacle held a kicking, scratching, screaming human, each robot turned and marched back to its ship, repeating forcefully though a trifle monotonously, "Everybody off Earth—everybody."

The people were set down carefully in a kind of hold inside the ship and the robot left after snapping the aperture shut behind it. Then it gathered more people, one to each tentacle, and brought them, hysterical or fainting or rigid with terror, to the hold of its ship. As soon as the captives began to get crowded and uncomfortable, the vessel would dart upwards and be received into the larger ship from which it had come. There, the robots still carefully, almost daintily, transferred the people in exactly the same fashion—one by one to another but much more immense hold in the mother ship. This hold had been fitted with tiers of cots like those of a troop transport and every cot held a blanket and pillow made of some unrecognizable soft white material. When the transfer was complete, the smaller ships and its crew of robots went down for another load.

All day, all night, the loading went on. In the holds of the large mother ships, those humans already stowed huddled in groups and stared upwards distractedly. Every few minutes, the solid metal ceiling high above them developed an opening in the center through which a bunch of wriggling, screeching people floated down. Then the ceiling melted together again and the new arrivals landed very gently on the rubbery floor immediately asking frenzied questions of the older inhabitants.

What was going to be done with them? Why? Who was behind all this? Where were

they going to be taken? Perhaps they were going to be eaten and the vaulting hold that stretched enormously about them was a kind of extraterrestrial pantry?

No one knew. Most of them shivered, expecting the worst; a few speculated sanely but no one knew.

All night, all day the loading went on. It was indiscriminate. No human boundaries were recognized. A load of Portuguese fishermen was deposited in the midst of a previous load of Chinese farmers from a collective in Kwantung. The Roman Catholic fishermen sank to their knees and followed an apoplectic Methodist minister from Albuquerque, New Mexico, in prayer; the ingratiating young chairman of the collective farm bustled about organizing a Marxist study group for a squeaking crowd of stylish matrons from Johannesburg, South Africa, whose Ladies Aid Society meeting had been picked up en masse.

When a hold contained enough people to occupy all the cots in it, the ceiling opened no more and activity moved to another hold or another ship. Thus, half the Congress of the United States of America was dropped wholesale into the student body and faculty of the largest elementary school in Bucharest while the other half vainly tried gaining information and establishing authority among the surrounding Madras dirt farmers and the rather puzzled inmates of a Damascus prison.

The loading went on for five days and five nights. Nothing stopped the loading, nothing delayed it. Guided missiles with nuclear warheads not only disappeared just as they arrived at target, but their sources became the very next object of attention. Every last launching site in the Arizona desert and the Siberian tundra was visited and cleared a few minutes after it fired its rockets. Here and there, military detachments fought on valiantly to the end, their commanding officers watching in stupefaction as bullets and shells bounced harmlessly off the alien robots who plodded patiently through murderous enfolding fire on their way to pick up the occupants of regimental or divisional headquarters.

A thorough job was done. Submarines were brought to the surface and emptied of their crews; men at the bottom of the world's deepest mine shafts with their arms locked desperately about the supporting timbers, were gently but insistently pried loose by the robot tentacles and carried to a last open hold.

Every living human on Earth was taken up to the alien space ships. But no animals. The animals all remained behind, they and the empty fields and the tall forests and the seas that swirled unendingly along the white beaches of the world.

When the loading was complete, the space fleet moved away as a unit. The acceleration was so smooth that few of the humans even suspected that they were under way. The space fleet moved away from Earth, away from our Sun, and plunged into the black gulfs of the universe.

Except for the shock of being torn from familiar environments so abruptly, the humans aboard the ships had to admit they were not too badly off. There were several water fountains in each hold, there were adequate plumbing facilities, the cots were quite comfortable and so were the temperatures maintained.

Twice each day exactly twelve hours apart, chimes were sounded and a dozen large soup tureens materialized in the middle of the floor. These tureens were filled with thick white dumping-ke objects bobbing in a greenish liquid. The dumpings and the soup were apparently nourishing and acceptable to the palates of a thousand different cuisines, though distastefully boring as a steady diet. After everyone had eaten, the chimes sounded again and the tureens vanished; they vanished like great moistureless bubbles. And then there was nothing to do but wander about, try to learn your neighbor's language, sleep a little, worry about the future a little—and wait for the next feeding.

Trouble started, as for example between a factory of Australian steel workers and a tribe of Zulu warriors over the favors of some nurses from a Leningrad hospital. If large trouble incipient riot, mass fighting ever got started—it was stopped immediately. A series of robots would materialize through the floor one after another, each one exactly like the other. Each robot would grab as many individual belligerents as its tentacles could hold and keep them apart until the passage of time and the ridiculous position in which they found themselves brought the angry people back to a state of relative calm. Then without making a comment or even a single illuminating gesture, the robots disappeared, exactly like the soup tureens.

They were certainly well taken care of. On that point, eventually, all agreed. But why? For what purpose?

Certainly, there seemed to be a sister

overtone to the hospitality they were enjoying. The care and concern lavished upon them not a few noted darkly were all too reminiscent of a farmer in a barnyard or a shepherd with a flock of fat, highly marketable sheep.

Or was it possible, the optimists argued, that these highly advanced aliens were mixing humanity in the melting pots of the holds deliberately? Having impatiently observed our squabbling and wars and homicidal prejudices, had they decided with a kind of godlike irritation to make of us one cohesive race once and for all?

It was hard to tell. No alien ever manifested himself. No robot ever said another word, once the holds were closed. Despite the best efforts of all the inhabitants of a given hold, despite the untiring ingenuity of the human race in all of the ships, there was no communication between the people of Earth and their alien hosts for the entire lengthy voyage.

All they could do was wonder—eat, sleep, talk, and wonder—as the fleet of enormous space ships traveled on and on. They went past star system after star system, they went past worlds in gaseous birth and worlds cracked and dead.

And as the days passed—marked only by sleep periods and carefully rewound wristwatches—most people decided that the complete lack of communication, as well as the casual way they had been handled, suggested a contempt that was very disquieting.

Many great and minor changes took place among the inhabitants of the holds. The young Danish housewife who had been separated from her husband and children grew tired of fighting off the advances of the Trobriand Islanders about her and made her choice simply, in terms of the huskiest and most importunate of her suitors, the member-delegates of the United Nations Security Council gave up trying to effect a rapprochement with the gabardined followers of Cham ben Judah-David, the wonder-working rabbi from the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, and sat in bitter isolation in their corner of the hold, announcing from time to time that they constituted the only world government legally capable of dealing with the aliens in the name of humanity as a whole. As soon, of course, as the aliens asked for such representatives . . .

That was the rub, and all felt it to some degree, and felt it more and more as the days were marked off into weeks and the

weeks into months. In the bows of every one of them—a diplomat and devout Hasidic Jew, pale woman from the shores of the North Sea and brown man from the wide Pacific ocean—nervousness about the future rattled and clattered. What was going to happen to them? What could the aliens want with the whole human race?

Most of them did not know exactly when the ships came to their destination and stopped. The realization that the voyage was over came only when the holds opened above their heads and welcome sunlight roared in. Except that—once the first wildly happy cheers had died away—they noticed this was red sunlight, not yellow.

And then there was the debarkation.

Done with much less struggling of course, much less screaming and fear wet excitement. The robots were a most welcome as they reversed the process of a few months ago. Men and women, with a few neurotic or superstitious exceptions, fought to be the first picked up by the hard, shining, segmented tentacles and transferred to the smaller ships that were attached to the sides of the large transports like so many baby spiders.

When the small ships landed, the human cargo enthusiastically continued to help the robots as much as it could in its own unloading. Ship after ship, now empty, sped back to the great fleet above for more humans, while those who once again found themselves standing on soil and vegetation looked about them.

It was not Earth. That alone was certain.

They were on a hard gray planet whose surface was broken by few of the hills and none of the mountains that most of them associated with topography. A rather dry-smelling grey planet, poor in oceans and barely stippled here and there with tiny, lake-like seas. A gusty grey planet without trees to shush the steady compaint of its winds. There were only broad-leaved, gritty-stemmed plants that grew anklehigh.

All the colors were wrong. The plants looked like sick blue spinach. The sun above them was a liverish bronze, old and stained. The sky was made of bile—colorless, featureless essence of thick green bile.

And on the night side, no moon floated through the absolutely unfamiliar constellations. It was deeply dark on the night side, and with the darkness a sharp sinkbedded from the ground-huddled plants. The stink was spread efficiently by the ever-wandering, ever wailing winds.

No, it was not Earth. It was not at all like

Earth . . . Earth, so exceptionally far away.

A Finnish farmer watched a small boy from Dakar tear off a limp blue leaf and munch on it experimentally. The boy spat out the leaf with an explosion of saliva and wiped his tongue furiously upon his arm. The farmer prodded a shoe into the ground and worried. *Grey dust that's all it is. What could I grow in it that I could eat? I don't have any seeds, but even if I did, could they grow in this damn dust?* A New Zealand sheep rancher bit deep into a finger nail as he wondered. *We didn't bring any herds with us, but say we had—what in hell would they be grazing on? No sheep in his right mind would go near those blue weeds.* A Bolivian mining engineer arose from an examination of the soil and said to his nightgowned wife, "My first impression, and a pretty strong one, is that this planet is rich in copper, and not much else. Not that there's anything wrong with copper, you understand, only there's just so much you can do with it. You can't make typewriters out of copper . . . You can't make automobiles or airplanes out of copper."

Men looked around in vain for wood that could be used to build houses, for stone with which to raise temples and altars and idols. They saw nothing but the green sky, the blue plants, and the grey, grey soil. Fishermen peered anxiously into the tiny seas and saw nothing swimming, nothing crawling, nothing wriggling. They saw only seaweed, purplish blue seaweed floating in thin, ragged patches.

A little boy from Chattanooga, Tennessee, toddled up to his mother where she stood talking in a low voice to a group of worried neighbors. He tugged at her skirt until he attracted her attention. "It's an ugly world, Mommy," he told her decisively. "It's an ugly, no-good world, and I don't like it. I want to go home."

She picked him up and hugged him to her, but before she could say anything—while she was still searching for words and thoughts—the robots started to build.

They came down, the robots, from the great ships hanging motionless above, each carrying a section of a prefabricated dwelling. These they fitted together rapidly into immensely long barracks, filed with the familiar cots. Each long barracks held one shipload of people, each was furnished with toilets and water-fountains which bubbled good potable water; each had multitudes of tiny loudspeakers mounted along the walls and ceilings.

When they had assembled the barracks,

the robots herded the people into them. They spread their tentacles wide, and they insistently, patiently pushed people ahead of them through the entrances. So many to a barracks, irrespective of age, sex, nationality, or family connection. When a barracks had been filled, the robots shunted the very next individual—husband, commanding officer, twin sister—into another and empty barracks. They were as efficient as ever, and, by this time, most human beings had learned it was useless to oppose them. The robots did their job well, gently and courteously for non-sentient creatures, but as ever, with the single-minded purposefulness of drones.

The humans sat on the cots and waited until all of them were housed. Then the robots disappeared. In their place came the familiar soup tureens and the familiar dumplings. People everywhere ate. They ate their fill, glancing at each other sideways and shrugging their shoulders. They finished, and the tureens disappeared.

Now, for the first time, the people of Earth heard the voice of the aliens, the owners and masters of the robots, the navigators of the grape-cluster ships.

It was an explanation (at last, *at last*, an explanation!) and it came from the many little loudspeakers in the barracks. It was given simultaneously in every language of mankind—you moved about the barracks until you found a speaker emitting words you understood—and it was listened to with great, almost frantic attention.

To begin with, the aliens explained, it was necessary for us to understand how highly civilized they were. That was very important. It was the foundation, it was the basic reason for everything they had done. They were a civilized race, enormously civilized, anciently civilized, civilized beyond our most poetic dreams of civilization.

We, as a race, were on the first stumbling steps of that civilization. We were primitive, insignificant, and—if we might pardon them for saying so—slightly ridiculous. Our technology was elementary, our ethical and spiritual awareness almost nonexistent.

But we were a race of living creatures and we did have a speck, a promise, of civilization. Therefore, they had no alternative: they had to save us. They had to go to all the trouble and expense we had witnessed and would witness in the future. As civilized creatures there was absolutely nothing else they could do.

We should know that not all creatures in the universe were as civilized as they. Wars

were fought, weapons were used. They themselves had recently developed, purely for purposes of self-protection, a new weapon. . . .

It was a frightful weapon, a shattering weapon, a weapon that smashed the constituents of time and space in a given area. They sincerely hoped never to have to use that weapon in actual warfare. Still, one never knew to what lengths an uncivilized enemy might go.

The weapon had to be tested.

It was impossible, given the terrible nature of the weapon, given its totally unpredictable aftereffects, to test it in any densely populated section of the galaxy. Furthermore, in order to get a clear and scientific picture of the weapon's potential military value, it was necessary to destroy an entire planet in the course of the test.

The aliens had selected the site very carefully. They had selected a sparsely populated solar system, a very unimportant planet inhabited by an extremely backward race—a race so backward, in fact, that it was just now beginning to develop space travel. They had selected, in other words, a world of no conceivable value to anybody consulted, a world that no other race in the galaxy deemed at all desirable, an absolutely useless, second-rate nonentity of a world—our Earth.

Here they would test their weapon. They would test it on a world whose total obliteration would not be noticed anywhere.

But Earth was inhabited by a race which had intelligence within, at least, the widest definition of the term. And the aliens were civilized, highly civilized, ultimately civilized. They could not just destroy another race out of hand, no matter how primitive it might be. They had a responsibility to life itself, to the future, to history.

So they had done this enormous, this expensive, this altruistic and unheard-of thing. At a cost so overwhelming that it could not be expressed at all in the limited figures of human economics, they had evacuated our entire planet.

They had carried us all the way across the galaxy (hang the expense! never mind the expense! when they did a thing, they believed in doing it right!) to another planet which, while uninhabited, was as much like Earth as anything they could find in the universe.

Its size and weight were almost exactly the same as Earth's—so we didn't have to worry about any difference in gravity. Its distance from the sun, its periods of rev-

olution and rotation were quite similar—our day-night systems and calendars would be little altered.

All in all, a wonderful new home.

Of course, there were some changes; no two planets were exactly alike. The atmospheric elements existed here in slightly different proportions; the water, while not poisonous, was effectively undrinkable; it would not be possible for a good long time to grow any edible plants in this soil. And, no doubt we had noticed, there weren't any animals on this world, nor were the mineral resources susceptible to exploitation by any techniques we had developed to date. However, taking the good with the bad, the bitter with the sweet, one way or another, sooner or later, they knew we would manage. We had a brand new planet, a completely untouched planet, a virgin planet, all for our very own.

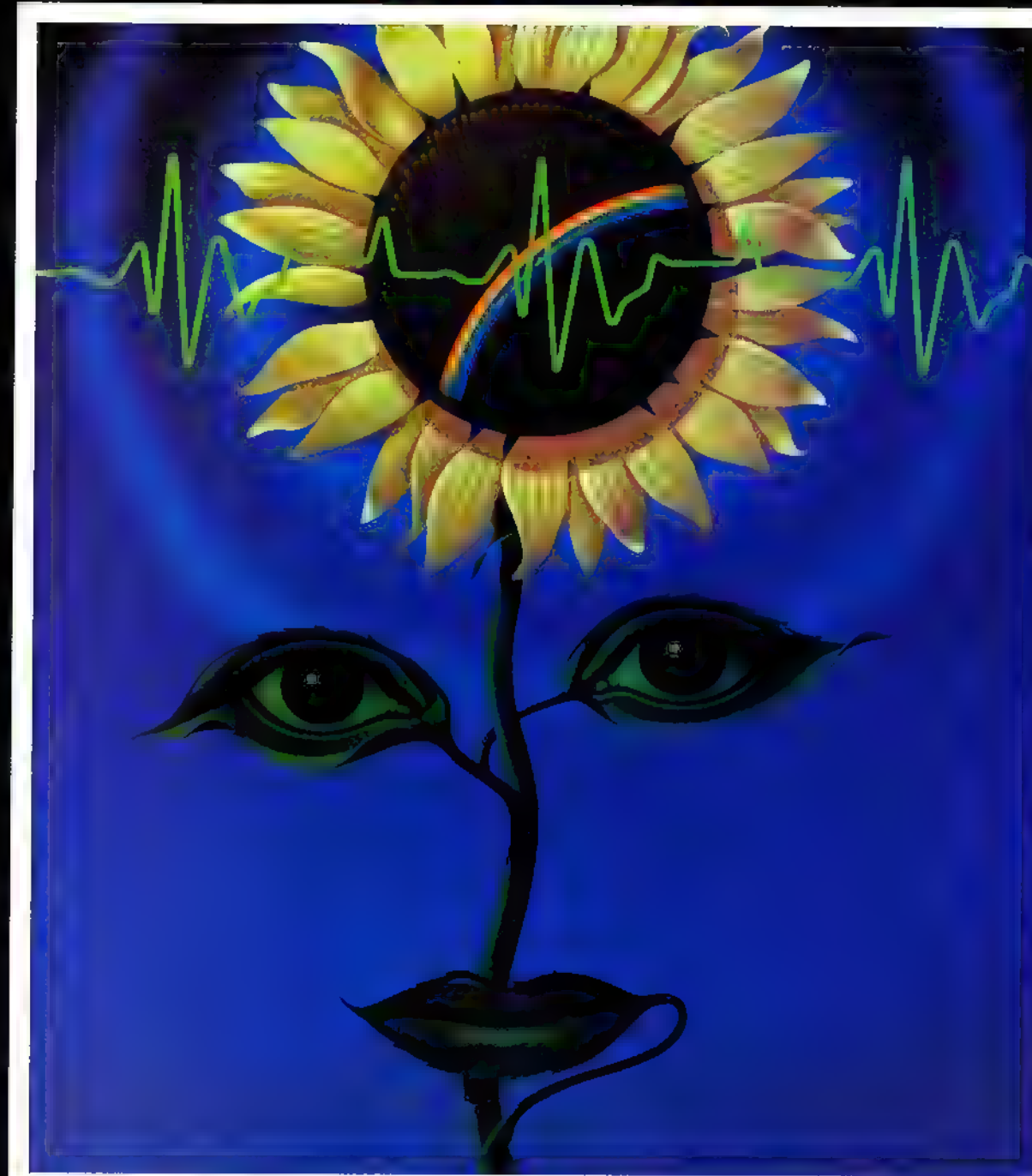
All we had to do was to learn how to use it properly.

Meanwhile, they would not desert us. Hadn't they told us how civilized they were? No, however long it took us to get on our feet and become self-supporting, their robots would be there to take care of us. We could use the barracks (they were made of almost indestructible material) until we figured out a way to make some other kind of home on this world. And the soup kitchens would be running, day in and day out, serving the good white dumplings designed especially for us until we developed some other, more indigenous source of nourishment.

But all this was for the future. We had had a long, tiring trip and probably did not want to worry about practical matters right now. How about a little entertainment? Something special, something none of us had ever imagined we would see.

Television screens appeared on the ceilings of the barracks, and humans turned baffled, confused faces upwards. Outside the walls, everywhere, the wind howled stubbornly, unendingly.

This was a rare treat, the aliens explained through the loudspeakers, a once-in-a-thousand-years sort of thing. We would be able to tell our children and our children's children that we had seen it, at exactly the same time as other, much more advanced races throughout the galaxy. "Now, for the first time, and at the exact moment it occurs, you will witness the total destruction of a world—the planet Earth—in the course of an essential and epochal scientific experiment."



Vickers was in Mogadishu when he turned the corner by the hardware stall and nearly knocked down the green woman.

VILLAGE OF THE CHOSEN

BY ALAN DEAN FOSTER

PAINTING BY ROBERT GIUSTI

Harley Vickers hated Mogadishu: not that he hadn't been assigned worse duty stations—Kampala under Idi Amin, for example, from which he'd barely escaped with story and skin intact. Or Soweto, South Africa's massive black slum, an ocean of misery and despair destined someday to explode in an orgy of violence the likes of which Africa had not seen since the time of the Zulu wars.

No, he'd reported from worse places than Mogadishu, if not duller ones. For fresh fruit, decent cooking, halfway reliable news broadcasts, and anything resembling entertainment, you had to take a four-wheel-drive vehicle south across the border to Nairobi. Mogadishu was devoid of such pleasures. His only delight lay in exploring the virgin beaches which stretched hundreds of kilometers northward toward the Gulf of Aden. The seacoast of Somalia was as beautifully rich as its people were abysmally, desperately poor.

Poorer than ever because of the debilitating effects of the seemingly endless war with their intractable and equally poverty-stricken neighbor Ethiopia. A human tide of refugees washed back and forth across the disputed borders of the Ogaden desert, straining to the limits the resources of an economy that had never been strong.

Vickers was half American, half English. He'd spent twenty years in Africa for UPI, twenty years which had blunted his early idealism by showing him to what extremes man could go in defense of personal idiosyncrasies. White or black, it was all the same. Hatred instead of understanding. Suspicion instead of conversation. He was tired.

Four months he'd spent in Mogadishu reporting on the relief efforts and the Ogaden futility. He was ready for a change—a change to anywhere. Cairo, if he was lucky, or Nairobi, or even frenetic and always exciting Lagos. Anywhere but here, he thought as he made his way through the marketplace toward his apartment. He was sick to death of the corruption and arrogance he'd been forced to deal with in the course of writing his reports. Besides, he'd said everything there was to say about the Somali situation. He'd been in the business long enough to know when his work was getting stale.

That's when he turned the corner by the hardware stall and nearly knocked down the green woman.

As she stumbled, her veil fell away from her face, which was as exquisite as an emerald, and as richly hued. She hurriedly

fixed the shielding gauze and dashed into the crowd. A stunned Vickers could only stare after her.

Then, showing his way through the mob of marketers, he was running in pursuit.

"Hey . . . hey you, wait a minute! Wait!" He knew she heard him because more than once she glanced back to see if he was still chasing her. The crowd was thick and prevented him from closing, but it also kept her within view.

He lost her on the other side of the marketplace when she climbed, not into a donkey cart or camel howdah, but into a late-model Land Rover. The driver floored the accelerator and they roared along the narrow road, leaving Vickers out of breath and anxious amid the rising cloud of dust.

The image had not faded, nor had the shock. The woman's face was vivid in his mind. It was not her exceptional beauty that transfixed him, however, as much as her extraordinary coloring. Hers wasn't the olive complexion of Aegean visitors or the coffee tone of many multiracial residents of Mogadishu. She was a bright, cheerful green—as brilliant as a St. Patrick's Day parade.

If it was due to the use of makeup or body paint, it was the most remarkable job of either he'd ever seen. When she'd blinked at him after their collision, he saw that even her eyelids were the same electric shade of green.

A blessing, a gift from Allah, a reward for his noble and virtuous life, the taxi waited for him around the block. It wasn't hard to pick up the trail of the Land Rover. The few motorized vehicles that utilized the streets of Mogadishu usually kept to the harbor front or diplomatic quarter and ignored these back streets.

The taxi driver earned his fare as they tracked the fleeing Rover through narrow brick alleys and down dirt avenues. Only when the Land Rover emerged from the city's outskirts did the driver finally concede the race.

"I am sorry Effendi. The road go no more. I go no more." His English was broken, but to the point.

Vickers knew arguing would be futile. In truth, the driver had pushed his battered Citroën to its limit. Beyond lay a track suitable only for camels and four-wheel-drive vehicles. The taxi wouldn't last a mile on that bone-breaking path to nowhere. Vickers watched until the Land Rover sank into the evening horizon before giving the order to turn about and return to the city.

All night that glowing green face haunted him. Except for her coloring, the young woman had classic features common to this part of Africa—part black, part Arab, a delicious and exotic mix.

As far as his news assignment was concerned, Vickers had considerable discretion. So long as he filed his stories on deadline and didn't abuse his budget, he was free to go where he wished and report on the subject of his choice. His nearest superior sat behind a desk on Fleet Street.

"I'll give them something interesting to print," he mused. A bright green lady—yes, that ought to perk the *Times'* interest, as well as that of the *Daily News* and *The Star*.

It wasn't too difficult to retrace the Land Rover's progress from the point where it had fled the city. Cars outside the city limits were as rare as compassion. He was undaunted by the task he'd set for himself. Many times he'd spent weeks in the bush living in the back of his own Land Rover.

Before leaving Mogadishu he'd packed in enough food, water, and petrol to keep him going for a month, though he didn't imagine he'd be gone that long. From what he'd seen of his quarry, she didn't appear to be nearly so extensively provisioned.

The road took him through Balad toward Johar, along the Wad Shebelle dry most of this time of year. The outside temperature was hellishly hot. The Rover's air conditioner hummed in protest as it fought back the searing heat.

Inquiries along the road caused him to turn toward the coast northward before reaching Johar, and then on through Marek and Harardera. Even a camel track was a welcome path in the wilderness.

In Obbia an imperious army captain tried to commandeer Vickers' spare petrol. Only the waving of his UPI identification and government pass got him through to Id-dan. He was nearing Migurtina Province without having closed on his quarry and began to wonder if he wouldn't have to drive all the way to Cape Guardafui. He was hot and tired and seriously considering whether he ought to pack it in when he saw the green woman again.

Except . . . it wasn't the same woman. He saw her selling fish in one of the tiny palm-frond stalls lining the dock area of Garad, a fishing village. Her veil was off—because of the heat, Vickers surmised. Maybe she'd been beautiful once, but age and a hard life had turned her skin to parchment. She was older than the woman who had brought him this far, much older.

More intriguing still were the two bright green children he saw playing on the beach, dashing down to the water's edge in the company of other, normal-hued children, then running back to dance around the older lady's legs. Their grandmother maybe, Vickers thought as he brought the Land Rover to a stop.

The children clustered around it, touching the sides, bending to inspect the mud-caked undercarriage. Garad was an isolated community and the Land Rover was as much a novelty as the white man who drove it. As an astonished Vickers studied the two green youngsters, all thoughts of special paint and makeup were discarded. They were seven or eight years old, a bright-eyed boy and mischievous little girl, both of them green from head to toe. Only their eyes, nails and body hair were exempt from the remarkable coloring, although the nails did have a greenish cast to them.

Vickers climbed down, made sure the door was locked and smiled at them. They stared back at him, innocent of deception or guile. The little girl kept one finger in her mouth and stayed close to the boy. Brother and sister, most likely.

He cleared his throat and tried his Swahili, hoping it would be enough. His Arabic was tolerable, his Amharic much less so.

They understood, Vickers asked where they came from. They pointed inland. Was that their grandmother over there in the stall, selling fish? No, an aunt. He hesitated only momentarily. Why were they such an unusual color?

Because they were fortunate enough to be among the Chosen.

It was some kind of sect, then. Something interesting had come to the wastes of northern Somalia. Yet there was nothing reticent in the children's manner, no attempt to hide anything. Not that there was any need to. They were protected from the attention of the outside world by an isolation unimaginable to Londoners or even the citizens of Nairobi. Only a chance glimpse in a crowded marketplace had sent Vickers probing their sanctuary.

Inland, they said. Could they be more specific? With camel and jackass the fastest local means of transportation, Vickers knew it couldn't be very far. Surely Mzungu, they told him. One has only to follow the Wadi Omad toward the setting sun to come to the place of the Chosen, where they lived with the rest of their village.

Not true nomadic types, then, Vickers mused. He thanked them and climbed back

into the Land Rover. Laughing children followed in its wake as it rumbled forward, turned eastward beyond the last fish stall, and headed inland.

The wadi he struggled to follow was nearly dry. Only a thin trickle cut its center like a silver thread. Anteope fled from his approach. Vickers ignored them.

It was nearly dark when he turned up out of the little canyon. Lengthening shadows revealed a gentle slope scarred by tire tracks. They led him up to the beginnings of the savanna. Thorn trees fought for the soil's moisture. Scrub brush provided homes for snakes and kangaroo rats. Towering above them all were the gleaming metal skeletons of three windmills.

No Quixote in his Land Rover, Vickers frowned as he pushed toward the cluster of mud and rock structures nestled beneath the towers. There weren't supposed to be any European outposts this far north. All the refugee centers were further inland, along the Ethiopian border, or south toward Mogadishu. Nor could he recall mention of any scientific stations or outposts in this region.

The windmills were of two types. One served to bring up water, the other two mounted windchargers for the generation of electricity. Indeed, it was unusually cool here. A steady breeze blew up the wadi from the sea. In the morning the wind probably reversed as the land heated up again.

A few lights showed inside the largest building. It was one story, cobbled together out of corrugated steel sheets, local stone and mud. Lumber was as scarce in this part of the world as chateaubriand.

He slowed the Rover to a halt and climbed out. Set among the brush and trees, off to his left, was a sizable native village. It looked deserted. As he stood there against the oncoming African night, a peculiar susurration reached his ears. He started toward it, topped a low rise, and came to a halt.

What was probably the entire population of the village—men, women and children—lined the crest of the next ridge. They faced the setting sun with heads back and arms outstretched. The local witch doctor or chief was leading them in a hypnotic, melodious chant.

And every one of them was stark naked and bright green.

A hand tapped the middle of his back. He whirled, sucking in his breath, his hand reaching instinctively toward the pistol at his waist. It stayed holstered as he stared. It was the woman he'd seen in Mogadishu.

Her veil was gone. So was the stifling chador. Now she wore khaki slacks, sandals, and a bush shirt. Her black hair trailed behind her. Face and exposed arms and hands were as green as those of the chanting villagers behind him.

"You are very persistent, sir," she said in heavily accented English.

His hands moved self-consciously away from the holster. "What is this place? Who are you, and who," he gestured toward the villagers, "are these people? And why does everybody here look like something out of a summer salad?"

She hesitated briefly, then laughed and hid her face for a moment. "You very funny man, sir."

A sudden thought made him say, "I hope I didn't offend you in any way."

"You did not. Come." She gestured toward the big house. "You must meet the Cobans."

For a minute he thought she'd said "Cubans" and he almost panicked. She turned to smile brilliantly at him. Her teeth were not pointed and were gratifyingly white.

"Please, sir. You will like them, the old mister and missus."

Mister and missus. That didn't sound very threatening. He moved up alongside her. Besides, he hadn't driven across hundreds of kilometers of desolation to run away at the moment of enlightenment.

"Tell me," he said as they approached the entrance to the major edifice. "Are you... are all these people of the 'Chosen'?"

"Oh most assuredly so, sir. That is what the missus doctor tell us." Then she added proudly, "My name is Rala. I speak English and have read real books, so I am assistant to them. It is me they send into the city to buy things for them."

"Not only do you speak excellent English, Rala, but you are also very beautiful."

"Thank you, sir." She blushed, and her cheeks turned the most extraordinary color.

There was nothing mysterious about the room she ushered him into. The furniture appeared to be of local manufacture, handmade and comfortable. A radio/tape-deck rested on a bookcase shelf, playing unusually muted Chávez. DC-powered lamps lit the room, drawing energy from wind-charged batteries.

An elderly European lady sat on the couch, flipping the pages of a paperback book. She looked up as they entered. So did the man seated at the desk across the room. Both were in their late sixties or early seventies, Vickers decided.

The man rose to greet him. "Hello, hello. You're the first visitor Mary and I have had in some time." He smiled and extended a hand. To Vickers' relief, it was the same color as his own. "I'm Walter Coban."

"And I'm Mary," said the grandmotherly woman on the couch.

"Harley Vickers, United Press."

"A reporter. Yes, I think I've read some of your stories, Mr. Vickers," said Mrs. Coban. "You've done a lot of work about the refugee problem." Vickers nodded. "You strike me from your work as an honest, even empathetic man."

"I write what I see," he said diffidently.

"And what do you see now?"

"Something I don't understand."

She smiled a soft, maternal smile. "You must be tired, Mr. Vickers. Thirsty and hungry as well. We haven't had company for dinner in, oh, I can't remember when. Now, since you obviously haven't come all this way to return empty-handed, we'll have to supply you with understanding, won't we? So you must also accept our hospitality."

He couldn't keep himself from grinning back at her. There was a mystery here, yes, but hardly danger. Besides, he was sick of eating out of cans.

"I bow to your demand."

"Please have a seat." She patted a cushion. "Here, next to me." Vickers joined her. Her husband vanished into a back room and reappeared a moment later, juggling three tall glasses. He gave Vickers one.

The reporter took a cautious sip, then his eyes lit up and he drank deeply. "Lemonade! With ice! Bless you both. Where do you get this?"

"By boat, from the south." The old man was smiling. "Rala does what she can for us in Mogadishu, but you know how limited the city's resources are. For real food you have to go farther afield. The lemons came off a trading dhow out of Malindi."

"Excepting seafood," his wife put in. "We get the most marvelous seafood here. Rala, lobsters tonight." The girl nodded, looked unhappy, and disappeared through another door.

The thought of a lobster supper already had Vickers salivating. "Really, no need to go to any expense on my account."

"Expense? My dear boy, lobsters are cheaper here than onions. Eat your fill."

The girl's sudden look of dismay had stayed with him. "When you proposed the main course, Rala made a face. Doesn't she like lobster?"

"Not particularly," said Coban. "Matter

of personal taste. It's all what you're used to, you know."

"I hope I never get that blasé," Vickers told him. The cold lemonade had done wonders for his parched throat. "You promised me understanding, Mrs. Coban. For me, that means information and explanations. I sure could use some. What is this village and why do its people refer to themselves as the Chosen? Why are they all green, and what the blazes are you two doing in this godforsaken piece of real estate? He blinked and wiped his eyes.

Husband and wife exchanged a glance. Coban sat down in the chair opposite the couch and explained.

"Mary and I did our early work at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Mr. Vickers. Most of the time we worked at night and on our own—due to the controversial nature of our project. We tried to publish, but met only with skepticism and disparagement. That often happens in science, and it's no less pretty than in any other discipline. We persisted with our work. Eventually our funds were cut off and we had to resign our professorships.

"Our interests lie in the vital field of food research, Mr. Vickers, in particular as it applies toward relieving distress in the desert regions of the world. That is why we originally went to work in Arizona. We worked for a long time with jojoba and other native desert plants before we realized we were attacking the problem from the wrong end, as researchers have been doing for a hundred years.

"Six years after we shifted the focus of our efforts, we believed we had found a method by which most of the world's food shortages could be alleviated. We met with the same kind of cruel indifference and hostility which had greeted our earlier work. It is impossible, Mr. Vickers, to do constructive work in an atmosphere of ridicule.

"So we sought a place to work in peace and apply our theories where they might do some good. We came here, and our assistance was needed desperately. Rala and her people were starving when we stumbled upon them. Mr. Vickers, the native residents of Ga'a are decent human beings, but you cannot share food you do not have.

"Our project is being funded by several farseeing, wealthy Arizonans. They have let us work without interference. Great men, Mr. Vickers, I will give their names later, to use in the story you will write.

"Am I going to write a story, then?" he

murmured. The old man's tale was interesting as far as it went, but he still hadn't supplied Vickers with any real answers. Were they putting him off deliberately, or was Coban simply verbose? He rubbed at his eyes again. The endless, desperately dull drive had exhausted him. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to stay awake through supper.

"Yes, you are, Mr. Vickers," Coban went on. "Both Mary and I have agreed that it is time. Your appearance here might be regarded as fate, if I believed in such things. And Mary has read your work, and respects it. That's good enough for me. You will tell the world of our little success out here in the desert. We have done what we hoped could be done."

"What's that?" Vickers asked. "Form a new religion? I saw your bare-assed villagers out there when I drove up. Songs don't relieve the emptiness in a man's belly."

Coban smiled and his wife laughed delightedly. "Oh, Mr. Vickers, the chanting's for fun. It's not important to the process."

"What process?" Vickers mumbled. He really was tired, he realized.

"They weren't praying, Mr. Vickers," Coban told him. "They were eating."

Vickers eyed him warily. "Eating? . . . Eating what?"

"Supper, I should think. Old habits don't die easily."

His wife watched Vickers sympathetically. "Perhaps it will be clear to you if I explain our history in more detail. I am a geneticist and Walter is a microbiologist. When we put aside our work with desert plants many years ago, it was to concentrate on plankton. Those are the tiny, ocean-going life forms which support much of the life in the sea. We thought of releasing plankton in shallow salt ponds throughout the world's desert regions and raising it like soup.

"While working with this idea we happened across an interesting and rather common little freshwater coelenterate named *Hydra viridis*. This particular hydra, unlike its relatives, exists in a symbiotic relationship with a wonderful alga called *Chlorella*. *Chlorella* is photosynthetic, Mr. Vickers, but it is more than that. In addition to producing its own food, it will also produce enough to keep its host alive.

"When *Chlorella* is not present, the hydra is forced to eat solid food just like its white relatives." Her husband rose and exited through a back door again.

"We became very excited, Mr. Vickers,"

she continued "We thought how wonderful it would be if we could genetically engineer a strain of *Chlorella* to be a symbiont with man. We succeeded. The production of food per acre of arable land is no longer a valid problem, Mr. Vickers. Countries like India and China can have as many people as they wish. With our friendly alga as a partner, everyone on Earth can produce enough food for his or her own body."

"Think of the peripheral problems our discovery will solve! Everyone will be a peasant shade of green. No more raising and slaughtering of animals for food. We're extremely proud of what we've accomplished. Mr. Vickers. Can you blame us?"

"If you're so proud of what you've done, why haven't you and your husband taken advantage of it?" Vickers asked. "Or is it suitable only for ignorant refugees? Mind you, I don't buy a word of it."

"Oh, we wouldn't expect a reporter of your experience and stature to believe anything so fantastic without incontrovertible proof. Mr. Vickers. Rest assured you have that proof."

"As regards your first question," Coban continued. "I am sorry to have to say that once a person has reached the age of fifty or fifty-five . . . we're still not positive where the line falls . . . the alga does not adapt to its human host. We believe it may have something to do with the decreasing production of fibroblasts as the body ages. With anyone younger than fifty, there's no difficulty in inducing the alga to take up residence in the dermal layers. Furthermore, the alga is transferred via embryonic fluids to the newborn. *Chlorella* even responds to artificial light, which enables one to produce food at night, if so desired."

Vickers leaned back against the couch, hardly able to keep his eyes open.

"More lemonade, Mr. Vickers?"

Lemonade. Cool, icy lemonade. Tired so tired. Shouldn't be this tired, drive notwithstanding. Made up the lemonade in the other room.

"Why?" he said thickly as he slid rapidly toward darkness. "I thought . . . you said . . . you wanted your story told?"

"Oh, you misunderstand. Mr. Vickers," she said solicitously, bending over him and inspecting his face with a clinical eye. "We haven't done anything harmful to you. Just put you to sleep. You need a good night's sleep, don't you? In the morning you'll have the proof you require for your story. Think of the headlines you're going to have. Mr. Vickers! HUNGER ELIMINATED! . . . FOOD

SHORTAGES HISTORY! . . . MANKIND SAVED! . . . Think of it, Mr. Vickers. You're going to be the most famous reporter in history. You won't be able to help it . . ."

The sun woke him, shooting through the window shades. He was in bed, a real bed with a mattress and clean sheets.

Last night came back in a rush. Lemonade, chanting, ice, smiling old folks a little more than what they seemed, drugged unconsciousness.

He sat up fast, relieved that he could do so. Everything seemed to work. Experimentally he flexed his arms, then his legs. Everything was in place. The only thing out of the ordinary was a tingling in his right forearm, near the elbow.

He looked at his right arm—and screamed.

Walter Coban appeared at the door looking concerned. "You startled us, Mr. Vickers. Are you all right?"

"All right? All right! Look at me!"

Coban did so, professionally. "A very nice shade, Mr. Vickers, if I may say so."

Vickers was holding his head in his hands, rocking back and forth, moaning. "Why? Why me? Why did you have to do this to me?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Vickers. You're a strong man. You'd have to be a strong man to have survived all these years in Africa. You can handle a little sea change like this. Besides, the effect needn't be permanent. Were you to spend a few weeks in darkness, your old, useless color would return."

"Don't you recall our conversation last night? You said, despite what you'd seen that you didn't believe anything we told you. We promised to supply you with unarguable proof of our discovery. You're going to need it in order to convince your editors back in London. This way, they'll believe you, Mr. Vickers. Even those skeptics in the scientific community who ridiculed us will have to believe you, after you've done nothing but sit in the sun and starve yourself for weeks on end without getting hungry or losing any weight. They'll believe you because you'll be your own proof. Mr. Vickers."

"Side effects," Vickers groaned. "What about side effects?"

"We've studied the symbiotic relationship for many years now. There are no harmful side effects. Without the change in skin color, you'd never know the *Chlorella* was present in your body . . . Oh, there is one thing . . .

You remarked on our assistant Rala's apparent distaste for the proposed lobster supper? Her disgust? You'll discover before long that the thought of ingesting solid food will make you nauseous, except for the tasteless vitamin and mineral supplements you have to take. Photosynthesis doesn't supply quite everything the human body needs."

Vickers licked his lips and said morosely, "but I like eating, I like lobster, and steak and fried chicken."

Superficial pleasures at best. You'll see. No worrying about what to eat anymore, Mr. Vickers. Think of the money you'll save. Think of the extra time you'll gain each day in return for spending a little time in the sun. Photosynthesis may not be an exhilarating way of obtaining nourishment, but it's a highly efficient one."

Heedless of his nakedness, Vickers slid out of bed. There was a half-length mirror fastened to the far wall. He gazed in amazement at his lime-green self. Now that the initial shock had faded, he found the soft, pastel coloring almost relaxing to look upon. They might not believe right away when he strolled casually into the London office, but they would certainly sit up and take notice.

He found himself wondering if Rala would find it attractive.

"Try not to take it so hard, Mr. Vickers," said Coban soothingly. "I envy you, you know. Mary and I are the discoverers—the ones who did the dirty, rewardless legwork. You are to be the herald of a new age. You should be proud. Before you die, everyone will look like you. Everyone will be a member of the Chosen."

Coban was right. Vickers knew. The system was too efficient, too benign, to be denied. The only problems in gaining widespread acceptance would be psychological, and he was as sure now as Coban that these could be overcome. After all, the human body was already a reservoir of living things, from bacteria to more complex organisms. Why should anyone object to a few more visitors, especially visitors as beneficial as *Chlorella*?

It really was a most handsome color, he decided.

Coban saw the change come over his guest and relaxed. "There, it's not so bad, is it? We're simply becoming one of our many fantasies. Mr. Vickers, and what a promising fantasy it has turned out to be. We have met the little green men from outer space, and they are us."

OMNI ENCORE PART TWO

M

any readers, at first pass, might think immortality and its necessary companion, zero-population growth, the ultimate ideal, but not after reading "Malthus's Day." Jayge Carr, with sensitivity and good storytelling style, depicts a society in which babies are created only rarely—and only as replacements for accidental fatalities. Absolute birth control (by the state) is seen to bring widespread anguish. This is one of those SF stories with numerous, mind-expanding ramifications. For example, it suggests certain questions: "What kind of a world would it be without little children?" and "Can there be life as we know it without death?"

In John Keefauver's story, "Body Ball," dying is the subject of central concern. The protagonist is not faced with issues of morality but whether or not his life is worth living. His problem is having too much of a good thing.

"Prime Time" by Norman Spinrad is a well-pointed tragicomedy concerning an aged husband and wife who choose a retirement of nearly suspended animation in which they remain conscious but live vicariously via videotapes. Spinrad's broad-sweeping and satirical allegory suggests that you can't get to heaven through a TV screen.

"In the Hereafter Hilton" is a story by Bob Shaw in which he creates a new mode of capital punishment that at once saves the convicted murderer from the awful foreknowledge of death while assuaging any guilt feelings on the part of judge, jury, prosecuting attorney, or public. A perfect solution, that is if you don't value the truth.

"And Whether Pigs Have Wings" is a morality tale, which surrealistically involves human frailties and suggests that through wondrous ways this "little world" may still achieve "salvation." Nancy Kress is mistress of the thoughtful sentence, e.g., "Such men always have cigarettes" and "Anything too organized will defeat its own purpose."

MALTHUS'S DAY

*They had a nearly
perfect world, where babies were
the best possible reward*

BY JAYGE CARR

The news came while Janica was light-sculpting, with Sylvie hovering nervously about the perimeter and trying to make herself useful.

That was typical of both of them. Janica, at that point in her life, anyway, lived her art, while Sylvie's reason for transferring to Paviova Village was to sit at the feet—often literally—of one of the acknowledged virtuosos of the newest and most demanding multidiscipline.

So, characteristically, Janica stood cool and elegant in her chartreuse paint dye and projectors, while Sylvie jittered, checking all the last-minute details—were the projectors perfectly in synch, perfectly centered on wrist and forehead and ankle, perfectly aligned?—over and over. (Most light-sculptors were content with three or at most four projectors, wrists and forehead, say, or more difficult wrists and ankles. But Janica was never content with fewer than five, and sometimes, with a contemptuous casualness that utterly awed her young acolyte, she added a sixth at the waist.)

But once the music started, it was Sylvie who stood unmoving, scarcely breathing, while Janica's body swayed in delicate interpretation of the plaintive melody that filled the studio.

PAINTING BY EVELYN TAYLOR



"Greensleeves," sang a poignant young girl's voice. "Is my delight . . ."

And Janica danced a sad, slow weaving of loss and loneliness; as she moved the projectors left their trails of living light ribbons of color, thick and dark for slow deliberate movements and thin and light for the quick leaps and piroquettes.

This one, Sylvie thought, this one is going to be . . .

The strident brr-rrring of a wrist com shrieked through the soft singing, and Janica jerked, destroying the smoothness of the furls of solidifying light.

Janica's silver-rimmed eyes widened, just slightly. Then she moved, still with that feline sinuous grace, to the shelf where her personal items were neatly placed. But the red light wasn't blinking; it stared at them, a continuous crimson leer.

"Override," Sylvie was puzzled.

Official override, Janica retorted and smiled slowly and her thumb pushed down.

"Citizen Janica Pétain-Suharto," said the life-size, vaguely familiar holo-image that appeared "as your officially computer-selected representative."

The news was all over the village in minutes, and it was the main topic of conversation for weeks—except among those few old widows who were, or pretended to be indifferent. Janica herself was completely blasé. It was, as she occasionally reminded her neighbors, her second time.

Sylvie was positively green with envy. Her mind kept producing harmless scenarios: Janica miscautiating one of her unnaturally high leaps, breaking her leg and being rushed immediately to a hosp.

The entire village exposed to some mysterious neoviral disease (nonfatal and eventually curable, of course), only Sylvie through an odd mutant quirk in her physiology, both immune and a noncarrier . . .

Even Sylvie knew they were only dreams. Nothing bad or sad would ever happen to Janica, proud darling of the powers that be, or to Phil, either. But who ever noticed Phil when Janica, sleek and elegant, was in view? Besides, this was Phil's first.

"But isn't it exciting?" Sylvie whispered to her new termhus, Ray.

Ray, older and far more experienced, yawned and switched channels on the holo that displayed over their double bed. "Yeah, sure, but it's not as if we were chosen. You'd do better to watch it on the holo; you'll see more."

"Oh, pooh, stodgy old thing," she pouted.

"Janica is my friend, I'm sure she'll invite me to . . . we . . ."

"Yuck. He rejected all the choices and reached for his termwife."

One hour before M-day they officially closed off all the transmitters in the village, except for one. (There were no fences around the village, but with the ubiquitous transmitters making another continent a step away, who knew—or cared—if the nearest village was physically a kilometer away—or a hundred?)

As M-day began, in the darkness at east half of the village were crowded around the single functioning transmitter. The secs made the people keep a wide opening around the machine.

At precisely midnight the transmitter glowed, and shapes solidified. At first the curious watchers saw only a team of white-clad medics, but as they moved, glimpses of a sealed carrier floating at about chest height were caught.

The chief medic identified himself to the security chief. Although both teams worked in shifts, they had undoubtedly met each other on numberless similar midnights. Still, you didn't get to be a security chief by being careless. All the medics were checked out; the checks carefully designed not to break the integrity of the sealed suits; and the security chief herself ran through the checks on the chief medic.

Once the checks were completed, the chief medic took over. Leaving guards at the transmitter, which would be sealed until M-day ended, the cortege turned toward Phil and Janica's cottage.

Phil stood proudly at the front of the mob. As soon as the medic was certified, Phil stepped forward, in the . . .

"Get back," a security guard snarled, just as if he hadn't helped check Phil out, along with the rest of the watchers, not half an hour before.

Phil stopped, puzzled. His feelings hurt. But in the . . . he began again, nervously backing off the grassy path and into the night, blooming mooncreams that need it crushing some of the fragile flowerets.

One of the medics spoke to the crowd. "Stand out of our way, please. We've a tight schedule to maintain." They pushed past him, and Phil stood staring after them, good-natured face blank, mouth hanging slightly open. It wasn't until one of his neighbors nudged him and said, "Better get along, Phil," that he came out of his daze and trotted along after the parade heading toward his cottage.

(It was a parade that diminished rapidly, as more and more of its components decided they could see more on their holos than by trying to crane over their neighbors' heads.)

M-day plus twenty minutes.

The security chief raised her hand to activate the cottage's announcer, but Janica opened her door, making it obvious that she had been watching the whole thing on her holo. The chief checked Janica's ID and compared her retina prints and pore patterns with the ID and—just to be sure—with central records. "Who else's present?" she asked Janica.

"No one at the moment," Janica frowned.

But, do hope I'll be allowed to invite some of my very special friends later . . ."

"Naturally," the secoff nodded. "With limits, as you've been told. And of course if they're already here, within the village. We sealed your village as soon as—"

My termhus, Phil, Janica gestured casually to indicate the red-faced man elbowing his way through the crowd, which was being kept well back from her door. To his outrage, he was checked out again before being allowed into his very own cottage. Then the secoff nodded and gestured the medics with their carrier inside and firmly shut the door.

(Only three of the medics actually went inside; the others either waited patiently in the grassy open space, the targets of numerous staring eyes, or moved off to other duties. Many of the watchers left too. Staring at a closed door seemed rather futile, especially when the holos would be showing the scene inside, live.)

Inside the secoff was performing introductions. "Citizen Janica Pétain-Suharto, Citizen Phil Jones Vshinsky may I present Citizen Medic Herve Ling-Hart and his staff." She glanced at her wrist; her throat worked, and a subvocal message went out. (The team has your shelter set up. Herve, if the second and third shifts want to go and relax.)

"Congratulations to the both of you," the medic beamed, stepping forward and shaking hands vigorously. "If you'd care to see my credentials . . ."

"No, no, Doc," Phil grinned heartily. "Good enough for the lieutenant here, good enough for this citizen, right, Lieut?"

You! want to know the day's schedule, of course, the doctor nodded.

"Schedule?" Phil was puzzled. He flopped downward, and an extruded slid out from the waist and caught him in a sitting

position with neat precision. "I thought we had our choice. I thought—"

Yes and no," the doctor frowned. His own throat worked silently. (Weren't these citizens *briefed* Shirza?) In his ears a tiny raspberry of disgust echoed. "Yes, there is a schedule and I'm afraid we must insist it be adhered to. However, there is a certain flexibility, with that and considering the subject's physical limitations—"

"Limitations? Phil interrupted. "I thought nothing but perfect was allowed."

"Oh Phil," Janica was disgusted. "Have you forgotten? They're *smaller*."

Oh? Phil's face cleared.

"If you weren't so borngly handsome," she muttered.

"The schedule," the medic had his disgust better than Janica, "begins with awakening at aught six hundred precisely. Med checks will take approximately ten minutes. Afterward you two, and as many as four of your friends, can have breakfast with the subject."

Yeah, we know. Phil was nodding. He loved to hand out favors. "You should see what me an Janny—" (Janica winced; she had to do him and *told* him!)—"have whipped up for breakfast. He's gonna love."

"I'm afraid," the medic was very firm, "that the subject will be limited to the food we brought with us. However, you may eat whatever you have chosen."

Phil frowned and reached out a hand with fingers properly positioned: a servo flashed out of the wall and inserted a ghted smokestick in them. "I can't even give him a taste?"

"Not permitted. I'm very sorry."

(Shirza: damn it, what kind of briefing.)

(They were briefed. Herve. Not our fault it didn't stick.)

That seems pretty unfair," Phil muttered. "I mean, how can I enjoy my treats if all he gets is—I don't know, soyameal, or whatever you've picked. I mean, it's my day. How come/can't pick the baby's meals?" (Shirza!)

You can pick your own meals, Citizen Jones-Vishinsky, but for medical reasons we must see that the subject's diet is carefully monitored.

"Ya. Thought you said he was A-okay."

"He is," he is. But he could get very sick if everyone just stuffed him with goodies all the time. You do see that, don't you? So we had to make a rule: diet administered by medics *only*. If we made an exception for you, well, we couldn't refuse anybody else, either. One treat might not hurt, but

treats every day by all sorts of people."

Phil pouted.

"Oh Phil," Janica said, "don't be such a bore. He's right, rules are rules. That's the way it always is." (From her vast experience of once before.)

"Oh." He looked unappeased. He tousled his thick robin's-egg blue mane and continued to look sulky. Then he thought of another grievance. "You say—hasn't he got a name, anyway? You say he won't wake until oh six hundred?"

Herve directed a burning look of reproach at Shirza.

"His name is Johann Meadows Singh. And he will be awakened at aught six hundred."

How come not until then? How come not the whole day? It's my day, isn't it?

"Oh Phil," Janica exclaimed. "He has to sleep, just like anybody else, doesn't he? We won't lose any more time than anybody else."

"Boredom! Why can't he do like anybody else who wants to put off sleeping for a day or two? Let him have some no-sleep, like us."

But he'd have to make it up later, dear, just like you do." She moved almost imperceptibly on the lounge she was curled up on, and Herve automatically licked his suddenly dry lips. "So it wouldn't be fair, dear heart, to make somebody else have less, just so we could have more." She stretched—and Herve licked his lips again—to walk her fingers up Phil's flung-out arm.

"Don't be a bore, darling. We'll take the no-sleep and amuse ourselves." Her fingers tickled behind his ear.

Boredom, Phil muttered again. "Can't even see him for six more whole hours, my very own."

Herve cleared his throat. "As for that, if you just want to see the subject."

Phil's frown disappeared. "Yeah, hey, now that's real blue of you, Doc. After all, we waited all these weeks."

The medic made some quick adjustments, and the opaque sides and top of the carrier slowly brightened and cleared until its inside was fully revealed. The subject, naked except for a simple loincloth, was lying on a soft white surface and was attached to various pieces of equipment.

Phil gasped.

Janica drew back, instinctively covering her gaping mouth with a trembling hand.

Phil spoke first. "What? What's the matter with him?"

Matter? The doctor's professional pride was hurt. "Nothing's the matter with him, nothing at all. He's a beautiful amalgam. A perfect specimen."

(Herve you idiot! They were expecting someone older.)

(Deleted!)

This is our very newest amalgam for this sector. He was decanted less than six months ago. We've accelerated his growth somewhat, but—

Why hasn't he got any hair? And why's his head so big? And why's he so small? And—

"I assure you, that's all normal at this stage of his development. His hair and the rest of his teeth will come later. But our surrogates beg for subjects at this development level. Babies they used to be called. You can stretch out your hands and he'll stagger toward you on uncertain legs—

"He can't walk."

"Oh Phil, do you think you were decanted knowing how to walk?"

How should I know! You *sure* he can't walk?"

"Just a little, as I said. Most surrogate parents love teaching children to walk."

But—but—I was going to take him to the park, see the kids and his old man, and—and you know—pitch a few balls around, and maybe take him fishing. We've got a beautiful pond right here in the village. Even if we had time, the old swimming hole. You know, simple, old-fashioned things, like in the good old days.

The doctor shook his head. "No, the park sounds fine."

(Checked out Shirza?)

(Need you ask Herve!)

but you won't be able to fish or swim or pay ball. But you can pay with your subject on the grass, have a picnic, show him around. The subject likes sweet smells, things, bright colors.

"The pond, then, Doctor." Janica suggested. "We have some lovely ornamental fish in it. Vegan, I think."

"Vegan? Is the pond seal topped?"

Why I—I don't know. I never stuck my hand in. Just looked.

(It's sealed, Herve.)

(Good. Might've known you wouldn't mess anything as obvious as that. I'd've hated to tell them no, after the way I built it up, but—contaminated on—)

M day 0930. The village park was of about average size, with grassy walks, bursts of color. Works of art here and there, from old-fashioned solid statues (made of

modern synthetics though) to the newest sight/taste/sound synergies. (Several of Janica's light sculptures were prominently displayed.) The pond, with its fluorescent Vegan gauzes. Nooks with seating nooks without. Shade trees. A couple of rezba courts. The usual.

The baby was chasing a butterfly.

Most of the village inhabitants who had not been personally invited to join the party were out in the park, too, but maintaining a polite distance. Most were content simply to watch, with far lenses, but many were making home records despite the fact that the professional home porters were hovering overhead, taking everything down.

Janica was preening. She was taking advantage of the attention and the porters by running through a whole series of her warm-up routines. When that palled, she took off her brightly colored halter top and dragged it by one tie end cngly near the baby. With a crow of triumph, the baby staggered toward the brilliant fluttering cloth. Laughing, Janica backed up, keeping the fascination just out of the reach of the chubby fingers.

This gave Phil an idea. "You know," he said to the doctor, "if I had a ball and just sort of roiled it toward him..."

With a wink, the doctor produced a shimmering ball and Phil, grinning broadly, rolled it gently along the grass toward the burbling child.

The child abandoned the top for the ball and Janica pouted.

A stranger shyly approached her. Her smile at him was warmer than usual.

"Look," his voice was soft, almost a whisper, his face beet red under a too-thin amber paint job. "You don't know me, but I'm visiting a friend in this village today..." (Strictly illegal, but winked at by the security officers, if not overly abused. After all, if someone said, "This is my new termhus—or termwife, probationary, we haven't gotten around to registering it yet"—most scroffs would smile and pass on, after thoroughly checking the newcomer out, of course.) "My name's Al Pavlov Lee, and I really hate to ask, but could I take a few holos of the kid? I mean, who knows when I'll get another chance, and..."

He really was very good-looking, and Janica's voice deepened. "You didn't need to ask. Plenty of the others are taking holos. Just because you aren't a member of this village, he may be ours today, but he's everybody's baby all the time. You have the same rights as anybody else." A slow

smile grew over her face. "But it was sweet of you to ask to make sure it was all right."

Oh! Impossibly, his blush deepened even more. "I know that. Only see, my teeholos broken. I'd have to come close, to be close, to get any good shots."

She pinched his cheek lightly. "Of course, sweetie. Take as many as you want." A sly, seductive glance. "You can return the favor sometime."

"Thanks. I... you know, he's the first I've seen for real. I mean up close. I... I really appreciate this, I do. I won't forget you—your kindness."

"I hope not," she purred. Then, more loudly, "Phil, darling, how about letting Al here get a few close-ups?"

"Sure thing. He didn't know the guy, but if he was a friend of Janny's..."

Al took several shots from various angles, and soon everyone was showing off for him, laughing, catching the ball and throwing it, playing to make the baby laugh. (Sylvie was amazingly successful with nothing but sticking her tongue out and crossing her eyes) all under the eyes of their friends, the holos, the professional home-corders.

Al made his move with startling suddenness. He tossed his camera at Phil, who was closest to the baby. As Phil automatically caught the flying object with both hands, Al swooped down and scooped up the child and was off and running.

"Stop, you fool!" Shirza shouted and began chasing after him, afraid to use her weapons because of the child. "There's no place you can go—"

In seconds a mob was forming in pursuit, but Al had picked his direction shrewdly. There were no cottages between him and open country, and no people there.

Except Sylvie, who had wandered away to pick a spectacularly luscious tiger-striped trumpetbloom for the baby. Sylvie heard the screams, straightened up, and saw the man carrying the baby and heading almost directly toward her.

Al saw the woman rise up out of her little depression, out of nowhere it seemed to him, and he swerved frantically.

She screamed and began running toward him, waving the flower like a banner. "Watch out for the baby!" Herve roared.

Sylvie could never have stopped him, not without hurting the baby. But his frantic swerve to avoid her gave Janica her chance. Legs flashing, she charged up behind him. An impossible leap, and she

was sailing over his head, every light-sculpting trained muscle acting with perfect precision. As she soared, she flipped too, and her hands darted out. And when she landed lightly on her feet, just as Sylvie crashed head-on into Al, the baby was safely nestled in her arms.

And it was all over.

Firm hands pulled Sylvie to her feet, and she embraced her friend, and just for a second she felt in her own arms a soft, dirty-crying, smelly baby.

Al lay where he'd fallen, crying, surrounded by grim scroffs. "She only wanted a baby of her own," he sobbed. "A day we only had a day. It wasn't enough. She wanted a baby of her own. She said she'd leave me if I didn't get her a baby of her own, her own, a baby of her own."

(Herve and Shirza exchanged glances over his oblivious head. Two for the treatment center.)

Then Herve took the baby, and Sylvie's arms felt strangely empty.

The rest of the day was sad, yantic, macabre, after the attempted baby-stealing, and the whole affair served as a subject for conversation and holos, professional and amateur. Such a heroine Janica was! And have you seen her latest sculpture? And when newer sensations made memories fade, holos got shoved to the back of storage and were forgotten.

Only Sylvie could not forget the powdery-soft skin against her lips, the sweet-sour baby scent, the odd feeling that had welled up within her when she held the baby within the circle of her arms.

Sometimes, during rest periods, with her termhus snoring exhaustedly and sat at tediously beside her, she would think about it, but her thoughts always went round and round in the same circle.

Babies were only decanted at the POP centers to replace the rare accidental deaths, computer-directed recombinant amalgams to replace lost genes and talents. There was no way she could ever produce a baby herself, no way she could have a baby of her own. No way.

And sooner or later she'd nudge Ray until he roused enough to offer her the only anodyne he could. But all too often, afterwards, he'd slide back into contented slumber while she lay, unable even to distract herself with socholo lenses, because her thoughts persisted, no matter what amusements the socholo presented.

No way, only decanted at POP centers—no way—no way.

PICTORIAL
NUMBER THREE



GERVASIO
GALLARDO
ARTIST













It was the ultimate gamble. The stakes? His life

BODY BALL

BY JOHN KEEFAUVER

Everything seems to be in order, Mr Wellington. You may now reserve the Body Ball at your convenience.

"Very good. I'd like it on the seventeenth, at eleven."

"It's available then, sir. If you care to read through the contract, and sign it, we can proceed for that night."

"That's not necessary. As long as the major points are the way we agreed, I'll sign."

"They're as agreed, sir, if you win at Body Ball, you collect one million. If you lose, all your financial assets go to the syndicate, and—"

"Never mind. I know the second part of it very well."

"Of course, sir."

"That's the only thing that concerns me, frankly—the disposal of the body."

"There's absolutely nothing to worry about on that score, sir. It will be disposed of per our agreement. We stand on our record, and I'm sure you are aware that we have been in business long enough to have an excellent one."

Wellington nodded. "We'll be aware. I'll sign."

At precisely eleven o'clock on the evening of the seventeenth, Wescott Wellington pulled his Mercedes to the curb in front of one of a number of understingy, shed-row houses and turned it over to an attendant who had been waiting there. As the man drove the car off, Wellington rang a doorbell at the house. The door opened up automatically, and he was ushered inside by a voice coming from a wall speaker.

"Good evening, Mr. Wellington. We come to Body Ball. You may hang your coat on the rack to your right, sir, and then enter the room directly in front of you."

Wellington was surprised as he walked into the room. The Body Ball machine was gigantic. He'd known it would be large, of course, but had not imagined it as stretching nearly wall to wall and being ten to twelve meters wide. They must have torn down almost all the walls in the house to make the room large enough for it. On the other hand, aside from its size, nothing about it was different from the hundreds of pinball machines he'd seen for almost as long as he could remember—nothing different on the outside, that is, the

inside, of course; the part immediately below the playing surface, was far different, deep enough to hold a body.

The giant pinball machine was the only thing in the room except for a chair in front of it and a few steps that led up to its lower end. As for the room, around the upper meter or so ran a strip of mirrored one-way glass, behind which, he'd been told, there would be spectators, both official for verification and some simply there to enjoy the show.

He eased himself into the chair slowly. His age and his paunch would be against him when he played the machine, of course, but otherwise he was a healthy man. Deeply tanned, impeccably dressed, gray hair darkened, fingers man-cured, and already

PAINTING BY GERARD DI-MACCIO

feeling an anticipation—a thrill that he had thought he had lost forever—he smiled when an attendant approached.

"May be of service, Mr. Wellington? Something to drink?"

"No, thank you. The Body Ball is ready for my use?"

"Yes, sir. May I help you with it?"

"If you will."

Wellington got up and slowly walked to the giant pinball machine and climbed the steps down at its lower end. On the top step he bent and went through a small doorway into the machine as the attendant hurried up the stairs behind him.

Inside, still in a crouched position because of the glass above him—a pane that extended over the playing area—he edged onto a bucket seat that was attached to a wheeled scooter. The back of the seat rose to head level and was resting against the machine's giant plunger.

"Now, sir, if you will permit me..."

The attendant crouched beside him now, buckled and locked the seat belt carefully and then did the same to belts at his ankles and wrists so that, besides being made safe against being thrown from the scooter, he was unable to guide it by using his limbs outside it, although he was allowed to use a—the body English he was able to muster.

"There you are, sir. All ready to go?"

"Thank you."

"As soon as I get out and close the door, just call when you're ready and I'll send you on your way."

"Right. It will be a moment. I want to relax some first."

"Of course, sir. If I can be of more service, just give me a call. I'm here to help."

"Thank you."

As the attendant left, Wellington mused with a faint smile that it was only proper that he should be offered "service" at this time—the pinnacle of his career. God knows, he'd earned it. All of it. Service came with the good life, the rich life. The gambling life. Millions won, millions spent. He'd had it all. He'd been everywhere, done everything, bought everything. And all because of dice, cards, horses, the wheel, you name it. He'd always been a winner. Always. And he'd don't have the slightest idea why. He had no system, no nothing. It was uncanny. He'd been barred from many a place through the years because of his continual winning; he'd had to disguise himself, use a phony name.

He'd resented having to do that at first—the subterfuge—but gradually he had

learned to look forward to it. Because when you won almost consistently, gambling became—there was no other word for it—just plain boring. To him, anyway, and getting into the places he'd been barred from was a challenge and knocked the boredom for a while. Boredom, in fact, was his greatest problem now, and he might even have gone into some other line of work except for the style of living he'd become accustomed to, and—boring or not—gambling was his life.

When he heard of Body Ball, he was attracted immediately, thinking it impossible to be bored by the game since he could never be certain that he was going to win in the long run—that is, one loss when playing Body Ball was the final one; there was absolutely no chance to recoup to win. He'd be dead.

He knew the backers—the casino people. They were reliable. He applied to play and, as he expected, was quickly accepted not only because they thought he had enough money to make it worth their while if he should lose but far more important, because he was a winner and because casino owners wanted to get rid of winners—legally. That was why they had invented the game; he suspected, with its extreme penalty for losing.

But why would winners play Body Ball in the face of such a penalty? Well, he'd don't know what motivated the rest of them, but he knew about himself. He was here for the ultimate thrill, the greatest challenge, with absolute and no possibility of boredom. One loss ended it; if he lost, he lost his life.

He had practiced—a joke. He hadn't even liked pinball when he was a kid; it was a game played by addicted robots—numbskulls, in his opinion. And, of course, there had been no money in it. But during the last few days he had wearily played dozens of times, always winning, of course. Even so, he suspected that the correlation between playing ordinary pinball machines and playing Body Ball was infinitesimally slight, if existent at all.

Now he would find out for sure.

Taking a deep breath, he called out to the attendant that he was ready to start.

"Very good, sir."

He felt the scooter move as the plunger behind him was drawn back by a powered device. Slowly he rolled backward until the plunger was released abruptly and he was shot up an inclined corridor at stomach-jolting speed.

Ahead of him, rising vertically at the

higher end of the machine, a banding array of colored lights began to flash spasmodically on a huge board, in the board's upper center brilliant green lights spelled out BODY BALL, and under the lights was a clock. Activated by the plunger's release, the clock's second hand was a ready-moving. If he stayed on the playing area four minutes—one minute for each letter in BODY—the exit slot at the lower end of the machine would automatically be closed at the end of that period of time by a device triggered by the ticking clock, and he would win his million dollars.

If, on the other hand, he failed to stay on the playing area four minutes and dropped through the open slot, a device triggered by his falling body promptly slid the metal covering over the slot and him. With the covering closed and with the rest of the lower part of the machine equally sealed, the part that is into which he had fallen, cyanide pellets were dropped into acid, releasing killing gas.

His speed gradually lessened as he approached the top of the playing area. Even so, the speed was great enough to jolt him harshly when the scooter hit a padded obstacle shortly after he rounded the top. The scooter, which had an inflated tire, rolled, bounced back with a jerk to the top of the playing area, and from here he would begin his all-too-speedy descent toward the exit slot at the bottom.

Just below him now were two raised parallel corridors. Hurting backward, he went through one of them, bouncing off its sides and triggering a barrage of blinding lights and a deafening cacophony of bells and buzzers on the vertical board and playing area (something, he was to learn, that happened every time he struck anything). Coming out of the corridor at a slight angle, he crashed into a giant mushroom-shaped protrusion that, with its springy edge, spun him off to another mushroom, and he smashed against a rectangle-shaped padded obstacle near the left side of the playing area. From here he dropped, alarming, until he crashed into a flipper about halfway down the machine. The flipper, activated on contact, shot him to the far side of the machine toward the top where he crashed into another mushroom, which smashed him into the bottom of one of the raised corridors.

From here he rolled straight down the center of the machine toward the exit slot, skimming past two mushrooms and not even getting close to a flipper, even though

he savagely yanked at the arms of the scooter with his belted wrists. He zipped past two padded obstacles, another mushroom, and another flipper gaining speed all the time. Ahead were two more raised parallel corridors directly in front of the slot. Below the corridors he saw there were only two flippers that could stop him from going through the hole.

With desperate yanks of his wrists and body against the belts, he was able to jerk the scooter to the left enough to smash against the top of one of the corridors, which sent him back up the machine about three meters. Right back down toward one of the corridors he sped, though zipping through it cleanly and setting off an even more horrendous barrage of lights and noise. But again, using savage jerks, he was able to hit the last flipper before the exit slot. It slammed him to the far side of the machine, where he hit another triangle-shaped padded obstacle with such force that he thought his head would be thrown from his body. Rolling backward, he crashed viciously into another mushroom. This one shot him against another tire-rimmed obstacle. Then he bounced off it and landed against another flipper, which smashed him against the side of the rubber-rimmed ma-

chine with such force this time that his head crashed into the back of the scooter, stunning him. Groggy, he hit a rubberized fingerlike obstacle.

And then he was speeding down again. A flipper jolt, and he was moving crossways, and then up once more. He was spun backward and came up heavily against a mushroom. Then he caromed off into another lights exploding before his eyes. Noise hammering him. Body spinning jerked. Thuds. Crashes. Bells into gut wrists. Ankles. Up. Down. Across. Down. Up. Across. Up.

He was near the top of the machine when the covering slowly slid over the exit slot. He had won — again.

He felt the old boredom within days after he collected his million. And it wasn't long before it was unbearable again, worse, because now, having won the ultimate gamble, what was left? It was impossible for him to really win; it seemed. With freedom from boredom. Quit? Quit gambling? That thought itself was depressing enough to lead finally to thoughts of suicide. Gambling was his life.

Was death better than boredom? He was beginning to think so.

As he was getting ready for bed one night, he gloomily came to the conclusion that it was, and he decided to pay Body Ball again, and again, and again, until he must lose.

It seemed that he had no sooner got to sleep, though, than he woke up with a start, his boredom gone and his whole body tingling with life.

He'd bet the Body Ball owners, with suitable odds, of course, that the cyanide pellets wouldn't drop into the pail of acid. How could he lose?

The theme of Body Ball — a life and death spectator sport of the future — is not new. By placing it in a huge pinball machine, however, and positing a protagonist who is so bored with good fortune that he is willing to wager his life against impossible odds, John Keefauver adds piquancy to the plot. The story is the third by Keefauver to be anthologized in this series. His fiction and satiric humor have been widely published, and some of his works have been anthologized in Random House's Hitchcock collections. Keefauver categorizes his writing as fantasy rather than science fiction. After a long career as a newspaper reporter, he now resides in California.





Edna chose to awake this morning to good old breakfast loop. A John was reading a newspaper over pancakes and sausages in the kitchen of the old home. The kids were gulping the last of their food and were anxious to be on their way to school.

After yesterday's real-time-shared breakfast with John, she really felt she needed the soothing old familiar tape from her files today. It might have been shot way back during the 1987-88 television season on a crude home deck. It might be snowy and shaky, but Edna still ran it three or four mornings a week in preference to the breakfast soaps or more updated domestic footage. Somehow it captured what prime breakfast time with John and the kids had really been like, and somehow that made it her prime breakfast programming choice.

Edna: Now, Sammy, you finish the rest of your milk before you run outdoors!

PRIME TIME

BY NORMAN SPINRAD

*They could live
any fantasy; the trouble
was the reality*

PAINTING BY
DONALD ROLLER WILSON

Sammy (slugging down the rest of his milk) Aw, Ma. I'm gonna be late!
Edna. Not if you don't take your usual shortcut past the candy store

Of course the old tape hadn't been shot from her stereo perspective, and there was something strange about seeing yourself in your own domestic programming, and it certainly wasn't as well written as a breakfast soap, but then none of the soaps were personalized and none of her other domestic tapes with John had footage of the kids at grade school age

John was always after her to share real-time programming with him. He'd voice her over on the communication channel and show her tapes he had made for himself with her in them, or he'd entice her with shared domestic tapes, or he'd bombard her with porn-channel footage

But the domestic tapes he programmed for them to share all took place in exotic locales, and the story lines were strictly male-type fantasies—John's idea of suitable real-time programming for the two of them to share ran to camel caravans across the desert, spaceship journeys to strange planets full of weird creatures, sailing the South Seas, discovering lost cities, fighting in noble wars. And her viewpoint role was usually a cross between Wonder Woman and Slave Girl. Well, that might be how John wished to real-time-share with her, but Edna preferred her soaps and romantic histories, which John categorically refused to real-time-share with her under any circumstances

As for the porn channels that he wanted to real-time-share with her, the only word was *disgusting*

Still, he was her husband, and she felt she had to fulfill her conjugal obligations from time to time, so five or ten times a season she gritted her teeth and real-time-shared one of his crude male porn channels in the sex-object role. Less frequently he consented to time-share a historical X with her, but only because of the implied threat she'd withhold her porn-channel favors from him if he didn't

So by and large it was mealtimes program sharing that was the least distasteful channel of contact and the one that saw most frequent use

John (wiping his lips with his napkin) Well, honey, it's off to the salt mines. Ready to go, Ellie?

Ellie. I got to make wee-wee first.

TOTAL TELEVISION HEAVEN 60 SECOND SPOT #12 FINAL ZED BROADCAST VERSION HARD CUT FROM BACK

A series of low, pink buildings, emphasizing sunrise through the palm trees.

Announcer's voice over (medium hard sell) Total Television Heaven, the ultimate retirement community for fortunate Electronic Age seniors.

A rapidly cut montage from the adventure channels, the porn channels, the soaps, etc. Make it the most colorful and exciting footage we've got and emphasize expensive crowd scenes and special effects.

Announcer's voice over (orgasmic) Twenty full channels of pornography, thirty-five full channels of adventure, forty channels of continuing soaps—live full-time in over a hundred possible realities—produced by the finest talents in Hollywood.

CLOSE UP ON A MAN'S HEAD

Intelligent, with neat, dignified, gray hair. As hands fit stereo TV goggles over his eyes. (Earphones already in place.)

Announcer's voice-over (institutional) You live as the viewpoint character in a wonderland of sex and adventure through the electronic magic of total stereo TV!

MEDIUM SHOT ON A FAMOUS OLD ACTOR

Cast someone with recognition value who's willing to sign up for a two hundred-year annuity.

Famous Old Actor. And that's not all! Tape your family! Tape your friends! Take your loved ones with you to Total Television Heaven and keep them with you forever! Act now—before it's too late!

CAMERA PULLS BACK FOR A FULL SHOT

We see that the Famous Old Actor is being helped into a glass amnion tank. He keeps talking and smiling as the attendants strap him to the couch, fit the earphones and stereo TV goggles, hook up his breathing mask and waste tube, and begin filling the tank with fluid.

Famous Old Actor. A vast tape library

Custom-cut programs to your order! I wish I'd signed up years ago!

The throat mike is attached, his hand is taped to the tuner knob, the nutrient tube is inserted in his arm (no on-camera needle penetration, please) the amnion tank is topped off and sealed. The camera moves in for a close-up on the face of the Famous Old Actor, seen floating blissfully in his second womb.

Famous Old Actor (filtered) I'm never coming out—and I'm glad!

DISSOLVE TO SUNSET OVER TOTAL TELEVISION HEAVEN

The sun sinks into the sea in speeded-up time over the pink pastel client storage buildings, and a glorious, star-filled sky comes on like an electronic billboard.

Announcer's voice-over (transcendent) No man knows God's intent for the hereafter, but at Total Television Heaven modern biological science guarantees you a full two hundred years of electronic paradise in the safety and comfort of your own private tank. And a full annuity costs less than you think!

FADE OUT

John. Maybe we can make it out to the lake this weekend.

Edna. Supposed to be clear in the seventies. I heard on the weather...

This season John had been acting stranger and stranger, even during their mealtimes sharing. His conversation was becoming more and more foulmouthed and even incoherent. He had taken to appearing in elaborate character roles even over breakfast, and yesterday's real-time-shared breakfast had been just about more than Edna could take.

He'd voiced her over the night before and invited her to breakfast the next morning in Hawaii, where they had real-time-shared their honeymoon in the dim, distant past—so many seasons ago that no recording tape of it existed, none had been made way back then, before anyone had even dreamed of retreating to Total Television Heaven. It had been a very long time indeed since John had invited her to real-time-share their past at all, even in a reconstructed version, and so when he told her he had custom-programmed breakfast

on the beach in Hawaii. Edna had been so thrilled that she agreed to time-share his breakfast program against what had lately been becoming her better judgment.

The program awakened her to sunrise on the beach, the great golden ball rising out of the dark sea in speeded-up stop-motion animation like a curtain going up, illuminating the bright blue sky that suddenly faded into existence as she found herself lying on the sand beneath it.

This is the theme of an ancient prime-time show called *Hawaii Five-O* as a majestic breaker rolled and broke, rolled and broke, again and again, in a closed loop beyond the shoreline foam.

John appeared in the role of a tanned, blond, muscled Adonis wearing a ludicrously short grass skirt. A breakfast table was set up at the edge of the sea itself in the foot-high wash of foam kicked up by the eternal rolling wave that towered and broke, towered and broke, above them.

Naked, godlike Polynesians—a youth for her a maiden for John—helped them to their feet and escorted them to the wicker peacock chairs on either side of the strange table. The table was a block of polished obsidian on Victorian-looking brass legs; there was a depression in the center out of which a grooved channel ran to the sea's edge of the tabletop.

This was certainly not their Hawaiian honeymoon as Edna recollected it, and she didn't need a tape to be sure of that!

"Welcome, O love goddess of the north to my groovy pad," John crooned in a strange, cracked voice. He clapped his hands. "An oblation in thine honor."

The naked maiden produced a squealing piglet, which she pressed into the pit in the center of the table. The naked youth handed John a huge machete. "Hai! John screamed, hacking the piglet in half with a swipe of his blade. Blood pooled in the pit in the table, then ran down the groove to the edge and dripped off into the sea. As the first drops of blood touched the ocean, the water abruptly changed color and a towering wave of blood arched over them.

A few moments later, when the eternal wave was blue water again and Edna's viewpoint angle returned to a shot on the table, the gory mess had been replaced by a white tablecloth, two plates of ham and eggs, a pot of coffee, and a bottle of dark rum.

"Oh, John," she said disgustedly, "it's a so... so—"

"Elritch? Excessive? Demented? John

said petulantly, crotchety annoyance cracking his handsome, twenty-year-old features. "You're such a timid bird, Edna. No sense of fun. No imagination."

"Killing things is not my idea of either fun or imagination," Edna retorted indignantly.

John laughed a weird, nervous laugh. A whale breached not far offshore and immediately a giant squid wrapped tentacles around it. A fight to the death began. "Killing things?" John said. "But there's nothing alive here to kill! This is Heaven, not Earth, and we can do anything without consequences. What else can we do?"

"We can have a normal, civilized breakfast like decent human beings."

"Normal, civilized breakfast!" John shouted. "Decent human beings!" A volcano erupted somewhere inland. Terrified natives fled before a wall of fiery lava. "Who cares about being decent human beings when we're not even a very, my princess?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," Edna said primly. But of course some small part of her did.

"Sure and begorra, you do, Edna!" John said mockingly. "Avast, matey, what makes you so sure we're still alive? For 100 how many television seasons has it been since we retired? A hundred? Two hundred? Verily and forsooth, time out of mind. Can you even guess, my slave girl? I can't."

Edna bunched. She didn't like this kind of talk at all. It was worse than his machismo adventure programs, worse than the porno programming he enjoyed putting her through, worse on a whole other level: she had trained herself not to contemplate.

"Of course we're alive," she said. "We're real-time-sharing now, aren't we?"

Bathing beauties water skied in a chorus line through the curl of the wave. A flying saucer buzzed the beach. A giant crab seized their servants in its pincers. It whisked them away as they screamed.

"Ah, mine Aphrodite, how can we be sure of that? Thou couldst be croaked and I could be tuning in to an old tape where you still lived. Har-har. I could be dead except in this program of yours."

"This is certainly no program of mine, John Rogers!" Edna shouted. "Only you could have invited me to a breakfast program like this!"

"I stink, therefore I am," John cackled. Lightning rattled. Schools of porpoises leaped in and out of the great wave.

And so it had gone. Nubian slaves lighting cigarettes. Dancing girls. An orgy sequence. And all throughout it, John bab-

bling and ranting like a demented parrot in his beachboy body. Only one thing had kept Edna from tuning him out and tuning in a breakfast soap, and that was the distant thought that to do so might precipitate the final break between them: the break between her and something that she could no longer conceptualize clearly.

John: (rising from the table) What's for dinner tonight, by the way?

Edna: Roast chicken with that corn bread stuff you like.

He kisses her briefly on the lips.

John: Mmmmm... I'll try to pick up a bottle of that German wine on the way back from work if I'm not too late.

He opens the door, waves, and exits.

Edna: Have a good day.

But now, while she watched her image bid good-bye to John as he left for work on that dim, fuzzy old tape she found so soothing, Edna wondered how long it would be before she would consent to real-time-share a meal with the "real" John again. A John she no longer recognized as the husband in her domestic tapes, a John she was not sure she wanted to know about.

After all, she thought, tuning to *Elizabeth the Queen*, her favorite historical romance of this season, too much of that could ruin her domestic tapes with John for her, and then where would she be if she could no longer live comfortably in her past?

Right now she was seated on her throne in the early evening light, and Sir Walter Raleigh was bowing to her with a boyish twinkle in his eye that made her quiver.

Rolling among naked teen-aged girls in a great marbled Roman bath. Popping off Indians with his Remington repeater. Swinging on a vine through a jungle of dinosaurs. Leading the pack around the last turn at the Grand Prix de Monaco.

Boring, boring, boring. Irritably John flipped through the broadcast channels, unable to find anything capable of holding his attention. What a lousy season this was, even worse than the last! There wasn't a single adventure program that had any originality to it: the porno channels made him think of Edna and her damned disapproval of anything still capable of turning him on, and old domestic tapes, he

knew would just make him furious.

Of course he had a big file of classic recordings and custom-programmed favorites to draw upon when real-time programming got boring, and so he started flipping through his video, desperately looking for something to fill this time slot.

Flying his one-man space fighter low over an alien glass city, shattering the crystal towers with his shock wave as he rose to meet the bandits. Chasing a fat merchant man under a full head of sail. Avast me hearties, prepare a broadside. Auctioned as a sex slave to a mob of horny women. Doing a smart left bank around a sky scraper with Lois Lane in his arms.

He really had some choice footage in his tape library, but he had run a lot of it so often down through the long seasons that every bit of it seemed engraved in his real-time memory. He had lost the ability to surprise himself, even with how gross he could get, and he had to go further and further out to avert . . . to avert . . . to avert . . .

Onward the Light Brigade! Thousands of screaming teen-aged groupies mobbed the stage, grabbed his guitar, tore off his clothes. Franky, Scarlett, he said as she sank to her knees. "Don't give a damn."

For only Edna had the gumption to be a real wife to him. Lord knew, he tried to be a real husband to her. Didn't he regularly invite her to real-time share the porn channels with him, and didn't he take pains to choose the most far-out sex programming available? Didn't he invite her to all his best adventure programs? Didn't he invite her to the best meat-time custom programming instead of the same old domestic tapes?

He did his best to make her programming day interesting and surprising, and what did he get from her in return? A lot of whining about his dirty mind, a determination to get him caught in one of those saccharine historical X's with her, and a dreary desire to meat-time share the same musty old domestic tapes over and over again. What was the purpose of retiring to Total Television Heaven in the first place if you were afraid of grossness, if you insisted on realism if all you wanted was to watch endless reruns of the same old boring past?

Striding through the jungle, a great hairy gorilla beating his chest while the natives flee in terror. Executing a snappyommelmann and coming up on the Red Baron's tail, machine guns blazing. Getting head from the legendary Marilyn Monroe.

Damn it, retiring to Total Television Heaven before either of them was sixty-five had been Edna's idea in the first place. John told himself though a part of him knew that wasn't exactly totally true. With the kids at the other end of the continent and the economy in such bad shape and nothing interesting going on in their real-time lives, it was only his job that had kept them from trading in their Social Security equity for a two-hundred-year annuity to Total Television Heaven. He figured that if he could work another ten years and save at the same rate, it would enable them to buy an extra fifty years of Heaven. But when the cost of living rose to the point where he wasn't saving anything, well, at that point he hadn't really needed that much convincing, especially since there was a rumor that Social Security was about to go bust and the smart thing to do was get into Heaven while you could.

But what good was two hundred and ten years in Total Television Heaven if your wife insisted on living in her tape loops of the past? How much fun could you have if all you had to rely on was the broadcast programmers and your own imagination?

Making love to a far-rescued damsel on the steaming corpse of a slain dragon. The image began to flicker. Diving out of an airplane, spreading his arms and flying like a bird, the air seemed to turn to a thick, choking fluid. Tarzan of the Apes, making love to an appreciative lioness, felt an uncomfortable pressure against his eyeballs.

Oh, God, it was happening again! For some time now something had been corroding John Rogers. He could feel it happening. He didn't know what it was, but he knew that he didn't want to know.

I'm just sick and tired of having to fill every time slot in my programming day with something I have to choose myself. He told himself nervously. Sure, he could time share with Edna and let her fill some time slots for him, but her idea of programming made him want to puke.

In fact, the cover of the insatiable Catherine the Great felt a bubble of nausea rising within him even as the beautiful czarina crawled all over him. Napoleon's mind felt a nameless dread even as he led the triumphal march through Paris. Because the thought that had intruded unbidden into his mind was, What would happen if he didn't choose anything to fill the time slot? Was it possible? Would he still be there? Where was there?

And questions like those brought on the

leading edge of an immense, formless, shapeless, choking dread that took him out of the viewpoint character and made him see the whole thing as if through the eyes of a video camera, lines of dots, pressure against his eyeballs.

He shuddered inwardly. Convulsively he switched to a domestic porno tape of himself and Edna making love in the grass on the slope of a roaring volcano. She screamed and cursed and moaned as he stuck it to her, but . . . but . . .

Edna, I've got to get out of here!

But what can I possibly mean by that?

Frantically he voiced her over. Edna, I've got to real-time-share with you, he said shrilly. "Now."

He tuned in to *China Clipper* now, and it's my favorite historical X. Her voice over whined as he continued to pound at her under the volcano.

"Please, Edna, porn channel Eight, real-time share with me now, if you don't . . . if you don't . . ." A wave of molten lava roared and foamed down the mountain toward them as Edna moaned and swore toward climax beneath him.

"Not now, John. I'm enjoying my program." Her distant voice over said.

"Edna! Edna! Edna!" John shrieked, overcome with a terror he didn't understand, didn't want to understand.

"John! There was finally concern in her voice, and it seemed to come from the Edna who thrashed and moaned beneath him in orgasm as the wave of lava enfolded them in painless fire.

"John, you're disgusting!" she said at the height of the moment. "If you want to time share with me, we'll have to go to a domestic tape now. Loop E."

Raging with fear, anger, and self-oathing, he foisted her to the domestic tape. They were sitting on the back porch of their summer cabin at the lake, overlooking the swimming raft where the kids were playing a ragtag game of water polo. *Oh, Jesus.*

"Now what's got you all upset, John?" Edna said primly.

John didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to deal with it. He didn't even want to know what he was dealing with. He was talking to a ghost. He was talking to his wife talking to a ghost. He . . . he . . .

"We've got to do more real-time-sharing, Edna," he finally said. "It's important. We shouldn't be alone in here all the time."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're babbling about," Edna said nervously. "As for more real-time-sharing, I'm perfectly

wiling to share mealtimes with you on a regular basis if you behave yourself here. At the house. On our honeymoon. Even in a good restaurant. But not in any of your disgusting programming. John, and that goes double for the porn channels. I don't understand you, John. You've become some kind of pervert. Sometimes I think you're going crazy."

A burst of multicolored snow flickered. The old tape. Edna sipped her lemonade. His eyes ached. He was choking.

"I'm going crazy?" John cried thickly. "What about you, Edna, living back here and trying to pretend we're really still alive back then, instead of here, in 1991?"

"In Total Television on Heaven, John," Edna said sharply. "Where we're free to program our time slots to suit ourselves. And if you don't like my programming, you don't have to time-share it. As for your programming, I don't know how you stand it."

But I can't stand it! John shouted as a water skier was drawn by a roaring speedboat past the porch. "That's what's driving me crazy." From somewhere came the sounds of a softball game. A 747 glided by overhead.

Daddy, Daddy! the kids waved at him.

But this is worse, he screamed at Edna, young and trim in her two-piece bathing suit. A neighbor's dog came up, wagging its tail, and she gave it her hand to lick. "This isn't real, and it's not even an honest fantasy; you're dead inside of here. Edna, living through your old tape loops, floating in, floating in."

He gagged. An image of a fetus faded in, faded out, faded in again. He felt something pressing against his face, like an ocean of time drowning him, pulling him under. Nothing was real. Nothing but whatever Edna had become, speaking through her long-dead simulacrum near the lake.

"Stop it, John! I won't listen to such filth!"

"On Jesus, Edna, we're dead, don't you see? We're dead and drifting forever in our own tape loops, and on, y—"

"Good-bye, John," Edna said frostily, taking another sip of lemonade. "I much prefer the way you were to this."

"Edna, Edna. Don't break the time-share. You're all that's left!"

Edna: Say, honey, why don't we go inside and make a little love in the afternoon.

A thunderclap rends the sky. It begins to rain. Edna laughs and undoes the zipper of her swimsuit.

Edna: Oh, I'm getting wet. Why don't you grab a towel and dry me off.

She gets up, giggling, takes John's hand and leads him inside.

Oh, no, no, no! John shouted as his viewpoint followed her. For she was no longer there, and he remembered every scene, every angle, every special effect of this program. Something inside him snapped. He had to get out of here. He switched his videotex to rapid random scan, unable to think of choosing a program to fill his time slot.

Getting head from Marilyn Monroe, seeing the Spanish Mañanitas float in the eternal amnion, a giant gorilla chasing dusky natives from dinner with Edna and the kids in the dining room of their house.

A million flickering electronic dots against his eyeballs, flying like a bird through the towers of New York around the Eiffel Tower, choking in the sea of time—leading the cavalry charge to plant the flag on two Jims—lungs straining for a surface that wasn't there—stepping out of the air lock under triple suns—trapped in syrupy quicksand forever, arriving at the sultan's harem in King Arthur's squad car.

Awake, aware, alive for a long, horribly lucid moment, floating and choking in the amniotic quicksand with meaningless images attacking his eyeballs—waking up from a long suffocation dream into a long suffocation dream that wouldn't go away, couldn't go away, or there'd be—

Dueling with the musketeers swinging on a vine through the jungle of the Great Barrier Reef with Edna in a hammock screaming orgasm in the harem with a dozen hours soaring through space screaming around great ringed Saturn screaming against the dead, cold, black phosphor-dotted everlasting void drowning, choking, screaming, god oh god oh oh oh.

As she faded out of the viewpoint character of Elizabeth the Queen, Edna thought of John. How long ago had that terrible final real time sharing taken place? Was it still the same television season?

It was time for dinner, and she programmed dinner, oop. C. She, John, and the kids were seated at Thanksgiving dinner. She was wearing her Sunday best, the kids were neat and combed, and John was wearing a suit.

John: This stuffing is delicious, honey!
Sammy: Can I have the other drumstick?

Ellie: Pass the cranberry sauce.
Edna: It's wonderful to have a quiet Thanksgiving dinner just for the four of us, isn't it, John?

Edna felt so contented, so at peace with herself and her family so right with the world. I really should invite John to real time share this wonderful Thanksgiving, she thought maternally. I really ought to give him one last chance to be a proper father to the kids and husband to me.

Filled with Christian charity, she voiced over to his channel. "John?" she said, scooping up mashed yams with brown sugar and passing the salt to her beaming husband, who panted a little kiss on her wedding ring en passant. "I'm having Thanksgiving dinner with you and the kids, and I'd like you to be a good father and real time share with us."

There was nothing on the voice-over channel for a moment as John handed the drumstick to Sammy. Then, as Sammy took it from him and bit into it with boyish gusto, John screamed.

An endless, ghastly, blubbering shriek that rattled Edna's teeth and poisoned the moment with unrelenting horror.

"John Rogers, you're an animal, I don't know you anymore, and I don't want to!" she shouted back at the horrid sound and broke the connection once and for all.

John: Don't gobble your food, Sammy, or you'll turn into a turkey.
Sammy, (turkey sound): Gobble, gobble!

All four of them laugh heartily.

John: Please pass me some more of the peas, honey. What do you say, kids, isn't your mother the best cook in the world?
Sammy and Ellie: Yay, Mom!

Edna beamed as she handed John the bowl of creamed peas. He smiled at her. Edna relaxed. How good it was to have a nice, civilized Thanksgiving dinner with your husband and your family just the way you liked it. Peaceful, and loving and together forever.

She decided to pay a romantic porn program after dinner. She would meet John in an elegant café, nod Vienna waltz in a grand ballroom, share a bottle of champagne on a barge in the Seine, and then make love on a bear rug in front of a roaring fireplace. She knew that everything would be just perfect.



*It was an exclusive hotel -you had
to kill someone to get in.
Only the jury could check you out*

IN THE HEREAFTER HILTON

BY BOB SHAW

The apartment was neat, stylish and comfortable—not at all like a machine designed for killing people.

For a few seconds after the entrance door had locked itself behind him, Renfrew stood perfectly still, taking stock of the place, trying to identify the most likely sources of death. The kitchen—always the most complicated room in any habitat—was one area that obviously had to be avoided. Every particle of food and drop of liquid was suspect in case poisons had been administered; the appliances could have been wired in such a way as to electrocute the

unwary user; and the bright-lettered canisters could be bombs that would explode on removal of their lids. Even the simple act of opening a cupboard door might release a cloud of instant acting gas into his face, and one started intake of breath would be enough to

If you want to stay alive, Renfrew thought, keep out of the kitchen.

From his position near the entrance he could see into the bathroom, and that also looked dangerous—too many chrome fittings that could spring bad surprises. He was going to survive the mandatory seven days in the apart-

ment—of that much he was sure—but to do so, he would have to be fantastically careful. The best plan—the one he had already decided upon—was to make himself as comfortable as possible in the center of the living-room floor and to remain there until the seven days were up. It would not be easy or pleasant—the matter of bodily functions a one would see to that—but it was a straightforward choice between life and death, and Renfrew much preferred being alive.

He walked into the living room and checked it out against his requirements. It measured roughly ten by ten, had blue wall-to-wall

SCULPTURE BY SHIRTSLEEVE STUDIOS

carpeting and was furnished with a good-quality settee, easy chairs and occasional tables. Several original abstracts adorned the cream-colored walls. The room could have belonged to a youngish, intelligent, not excessively trendy person living just about anywhere between New York and Los Angeles—except for two atypical features. One was the complete absence of windows, and the other was the display tube in the wall above the artificial fireplace.

On the screen, in pulsing amber sans-serif lettering, were two words: JURY OUT.

Renfrew examined the room critically and decided at once that the largest table, positioned near the middle of the floor, would have to be moved against one of the walls to give him the clear central space he needed. When the room armed itself against him, he was not going to risk even the most fleeting contact with any of the artifacts it contained. For all he knew, every piece of furniture would begin to ooze contact poison as soon as the jury returned the verdict of guilty, and he wanted to be sure he would not roll over in his sleep and touch something.

The table was surprisingly heavy when he tried to move it, and for a moment Renfrew feared it was anchored to the floor. He changed tactics, pushing instead of lifting, and this time the table slid fairly easily, creating deep furrows in the carpet. When it had come to rest against the wall, he stepped back with widespread arms and gauged the size of the area he had cleared; it appeared ample for his needs.

This seems a shade too easy, he thought, his confidence faltering. Nobody knew what percentage of condemned murderers actually lasted out the week—it was the practice for humane reasons to whisk survivors off to cozy words in total anonymity and secrecy—but if the system could be beaten merely by camping out in the center of a room, would they not modify it? Was there a chance that the carpet itself could become toxic? Or that rapiers would zip upward through the floor during the night?

No, that wouldn't be fair. Renfrew decided, his fears abating somewhat. That way the apartment would be nothing more than an execution chamber, and the whole point of the Capital Punishment Reform Act of 2061 was that it removed the awful foreknowledge of death—the feature of earlier systems to which humanitarians had most strongly objected. There had to be some

prospect of getting through the week alive. It was simply a matter of intelligence, determination, and self-control. And of lasting seven days without a drink of water.

The prison micropedia had been annoyingly imprecise about how long a man could survive on zero liquid intake. Some of the quoted authorities had avoided giving any estimate at all, and others had been content to state that death would occur after seven to ten days. The spread, Renfrew supposed, was due to such factors as the size, weight, and general health of the subject and the rate of water loss from the tissues, and in that respect he was doing all he could to tip the balance in his favor. He was naturally pudgy around the middle, and throughout the four days of his trial he had loaded all his food with salt and had drunk copiously of tea, coffee, milk, and water. His tendency to retain fluids, something he had often bemoaned in the past, had enabled him to increase his body weight by approximately five kilograms—equal to four liters of life-giving liquid.

That alone would probably be sufficient to ensure his survival, but Renfrew had gone further. Knowing in advance that he would be stripped of all personal possessions before being installed in the apartment, he had taken time after breakfast to spray most of his skin with an antiperspirant, which, fortunately, was quite odorless. He suspected that its effectiveness would fade rather quickly, but closing his pores and preventing evaporation for even part of a day gave him that extra edge in the battle for life. Only two more measures remained to be taken.

Renfrew glanced at the screen above the fireplace, checking that the jurors were still deliberating. He had been in the apartment less than five minutes, but his defense had gone so seriously awry that he was half-prepared for a verdict to be reached in record time. Fortesque, the young state-appointed attorney, had tried to make capital from the fact that the store security guard shot by Renfrew had himself been indicted, for the manslaughter of an unarmed kid who had tried to run off with a tray of gold rings. The proposal had been that Renfrew was defending himself against a trigger-happy zealot, but it was obvious to Renfrew that the jurors were in favor of trigger-happy zealots and would have been pleased to employ teams of them to safeguard their own property. At that point he had begun thinking very hard indeed about ways of surviving for a week in—to

give the apartment one of its more popular labels—the Hereafter Hilton.

The first of the remaining precautions was to reduce evaporation of bodily moisture even further by turning the heat down. Renfrew located the thermostat and adjusted it to its lowest level. He then went into the kitchen, filled a tumbler with water, and began sipping it with the intention of increasing his fluid reserves. The notion of filling all available vessels and laying in a week's supply of water was tempting, but too dangerous. Any microscopic bubble in a glass could be a poison container to be opened by remote control as soon as the jury had voted. A low but insistent chiming sound filled the apartment. He set the tumbler down, went back into the living room, and looked at the screen.

It now said: JURY VOTING.

"Vote early and vote often," Renfrew said aloud in jocular tones, trying to neutralize the spasms of alarm he had felt on realizing that his very existence was now being laid on the line. He took a cushion from a chair and set it in the middle of the floor, then hesitated, frowning. A cushion was just as much an artifact as a microwave oven, just as capable of being booby-trapped. He skimmed it back onto the chair and squatted on the carpet, his face turned toward the screen as he waited for the final announcement. In addition to his fear, he could feel powerful undercurrents of excitement, and it came to him that the provisions of the 2061 act had been successfully implemented in the present system. He was about to be sentenced to death. Yet he had absolutely no sense of imminent doom.

The inevitable reaction to the steady increase in violent crime had begun in the last quarter of the twentieth century with one state after another reintroducing the death penalty. By the middle of the twenty-first century capital punishment had become almost universal, coast to coast, and the moral dilemma facing the legislators had grown in proportion. How could one condemn killing on the one hand while going on taking human lives with the other? Variations in the actual method of execution had been tried, but the principal objections to egalitarian killing had remained the same. It was totally inhuman to tell a man exactly when and how he was going to die, then leave him to sweat out his time. And if the state was inhuman, could its citizens be expected to be otherwise?

It was basically a question of how to be

cruel in a kindly way—and a workable answer had come along in 2061. The lengthy soul-destroying delays of earlier systems had been eliminated by direct implementation of the majority vote of a thirteen-man jury, and the dreadful certainty of death had been replaced by the challenge of a week in the apartment. Not only were the exact time and method of execution decently shrouded in mystery, but there was also a ray of hope that the grim event could be avoided altogether. And that made all the difference.

Renfrew found that he was tense, alert, stimulated and—above all—confident that he was going to beat the system. There remained only a trace of furtive, niggling doubt. His idea seemed foolproof, but it had been rather easy to conceive. It had, in fact, been the first scheme to blossom in his mind, and he knew perfectly well that he was anything but a genius. If he could come up with a successful plan, anybody could. Did this mean that nobody but the occasional moron ever paid the supreme penalty? Or was there some other inconspicuous factor he had overlooked?

There was another chiming sound, and the message on the screen was replaced by a new set of words scribed in raw crim-

SON. "YOU ARE IMPRISONED AGAIN, VICTIM."

On the lower part of the display a sweep hand began remorselessly erasing a sixty-second clock. *I'm going to be all right, he thought. All I've got to do is stay put for seven days.*

His gaze picked out two vertical cracks in the skirting board of the wall opposite him. It looked as if a small flap-type door had been built into the base of the wall. He stared at the door, feeling oddly threatened as he tried to guess its purpose.

Robotic cleaners!

The apartment was as immaculate as only an automated cleaning system could make it, which meant that at night, when the occupants were asleep in bed, silent little machines came out of the walls and scavenged every speck of dirt. But he wasn't going to be in bed! He was going to be laid out on the floor while the busy robots came nosing and nuzzling around him, and any one of them could be capable of killing him in a dozen different ways.

Renfrew looked at the clock. Twenty seconds until the apartment declared war.

He half-rose, his face turning toward the kitchen. Was there time to run in there, snatch up the lightweight table, and get back with it? Would he be safe squatting

on top of the table? What if he were to . . . ?

His hands fluttered to his mouth as he heard the final chime that signaled the jury's verdict. He glanced involuntarily in the direction of the screen, then froze, his chin sagging with incredulity as he read the three words electronically emblazoned across the face of the tube.

VERDICT: NOT GUILTY.

The breath left his body in a noisy quivering sob. He pushed a hank of hair away from his forehead, as if giving himself a better view of the glowing words might change their import. The message remained the same. He was a free man!

Renfrew got to his feet, suddenly conscious of how much he had been dreading the ordeal that had lain ahead. He took a last look at the apartment, gave a low chuckle of relief, then strode to the door with a buoyant tread, keyed up for his first taste of liberty in many months.

The doorknob did not turn when he grasped it.

Instead it fired a cloud of poison through the skin of Renfrew's palm—a poison so swift-acting that he had no time to realize he had been tricked by executioners who, in their determination to be humane, were not above telling a little white lie.





*She tried to rekindle that sense
of wonder, of enigma . . . of
shoes, ships and sealing wax.*

AND WHETHER PIGS HAVE WINGS

BY NANCY KRESS

Three men are walking on the beach below: one of them will be mine

I stand at the top of the dune, my feet a little apart, braced against the wind. Gritty sand seeps into my leather sandals, and my long blond hair whips around my face, covering my eyes, then uncovering them. I know how I look to the men below, in this bikini-clad body the color of fresh toast.

Soon.

The first man jogs toward me. He is perhaps 30, tall, dressed in jeans and a bulky red sweater with the knotty bumps of inexpert hand knitting. He moves easily, in a loose, even lopes that smooth out the rocky ground underfoot, humming an aria off key. I know he will not do. I look away, and he jogs by with only one regretful look back over his shoulder.

As the second man comes closer, I see that he is quite young, still half child, and

PAINTING BY BOB VENOSA

that he is so absorbed in the book he is reading as he walks that he hasn't noticed me at all. He holds the book with both hands, fingers and thumbs splayed to keep the wind from turning the pages. Over the top of the garish dust jacket, an artist's inventive misconception of a spaceship: the boy's eyes are wide pale blue, the pupils dilated as they move intently back and forth over the page. I can't keep from smiling—certainly not him!

The third man approaches slowly, from the opposite direction. He is quite far away: I wait patiently the bracelet on my arm glowing not entirely in reflection of the sunset over the ocean. He is looking not at the sunset but down at his feet, picking his way over the rocks, avoiding wetting his shoes in the tide pools. Even I can tell they are expensive shoes—Ita an?—and that they have been carefully chosen to match his gray slacks and open-neck silk shirt. He frowns at the rocks, lips together, his jaw a bit too heavy and his eyes a bit too red. I touch my bracelet and start down the dune, angling toward the line of high rocks he will cross next. When he is on top of them he sees me coming toward him, stops, waits.

"I wonder if I might borrow a cigarette." My voice is husky, low—what I think of as a deep purple voice. Such men always have cigarettes.

He hands me the cigarette wordlessly, his eyes appraising. They are light gray startlingly pale against his tan, and very hard. I take the unlit cigarette and drop it, grind it on the rock beneath my sandal and start to run, already changing. By the time I am halfway down the line of rocks, perhaps 30 feet away from him, the scales have already begun to appear on my legs and rump, bright green scales the color of new grass. I dive from the end of the rocks, an impossibly high dive for my starting position, curving in a high arch and hanging there, suspended against the sunset as dancers of ballet—the most beautiful thing I have seen here—seem to hang suspended before the downward plunge from their crackling leaps. By the top of the dive, my legs have already fused to tail, silver green in its backward flip over my bare breasts. I hit the water in a cloud of golden spray, then up again for my hair to writhe around me in the foam. I just catch his face in the nanosecond of change from shock to fear, and then I dive again, my tail breaking surface, clear against the flaming sky. This dive is deep, cold, and strong, only

the glow from the bracelet guiding me, until I surface in the power room aboard ship, beyond the moon.

...
"Good morning, Mr. Carruthers, sir. Twenty-sixth floor?"

"Please, Jerry."

"Good morning, sir. How nice to see you back!"

"Morning, Louise. This the mail? I'll take it in with me."

"Welcome back, Mr. Carruthers. Did you enjoy your vacation away from the office?"

"Very nice, David, see if Mr. Poole can see me, right away, in my office."

"Certainly, sir."

"Louise, coffee for two."

"Right away, sir."

Al—good to have you back! So how was the action at the Cape? Lots of sun?

"Lots, Josh, what's this report I got from Sam Lister on the oil deal? Who the hell came up with those cock-eyed figures on the new shoreline rigging method, and why were they leaked to the press without checking with me?"

"I can explain about that, Al."

"I hope so. I certainly hope so."

Let's go into your office. Can we—oh, here comes the coffee already. Right on top of it, as a ways! Now, about the oil figures—the strategy was—

...
The child is not quite three. He stands behind the tarpaper shack, barefoot on the dusty ground, sucking his thumb. Small night noises, crickets and rabbits and the sloughing of wind in pine, are drowned out by the screaming coming from the shack.

"Lousy bitch!"

No no Lew—God Lew no "

Lousy fucking bitch!"

The child looks over his shoulder at the shack. There is a sore on the shoulder, oozing pus the color of rotted peaches. The dull nonexpression on the child's face in his dark dead eyes, doesn't change until another sound comes from the shack, the thud of fist on flesh and bone, followed by a keening wail that dies away in more thuds. The child yanks his thumb from his mouth and starts to run, legs pumping and the babyish curve of his belly swaying from side to side, until he reaches the dark edge of the wood. He runs into a blackberry thicket, starts to yell, and then abruptly stops, staring back at the shack. The blackberry thorns grab his cotton shirt and wet diaper, draw blood that trickles down his arms and dusty feet in thick, sticky trails.

The child makes a low whuffling sound, eeehhh eeehhh, without hope. His dull face still has not changed expression.

I hop from a clump of ragweed. In the random moonlight my fur is white, except for pink nose and ears and the glowing bracelet where my paws become tiny pink hands. I can feel the absurd white cotton-tail twitching behind me, rising with each hop and then falling as I sit up on my haunches and use my hands to free the child from the blackberry thorns. He gazes at me and puts his thumb in his mouth. The shack behind us is silent.

I twitch my nose at him, then my ears. I cover my eyes with my hands and peek at him through the fingers. Slowly, reluctantly, as if it is being dragged from him and he will regret it later, the child smiles. His milk teeth gleam in his dark little face. I twitch my nose again, pick a blackberry and hold it out to him. It is hard and sour, not yet ripe, but he eats it. In the warm darkness his wondering gurgle carries clearly sharp as a sword.

...
"It's the environmentalist lobby, Al, that's the real stickler. Bunch of bleeding hearts, but they're organized, and they've got their votes. Danchel for one—he needs the support or it's no-go next election, after that Medcaid fiasco in his district. We can get our votes, too, of course—no problem, Cranston's in Washington now—but not cheap. You gotta remember that with the new process the whole shoreline is going to end up a real mess, and everybody's holding out for enough time to ride out the public yelling. I carried those figures here, which is why the total might look a little high to you, but I fixed it so it wouldn't to the audit boys, if it comes to that."

How much shoreline are we talking about, Josh? Exactly?

"Twenty point six miles. On your map—from here to here. Mostly US Seacoast Wildlife Preserve—a few small fry. No problem."

...
Picture three successive circles, interlocking but not by much. In the first lies the immediate sensory world—or what you think is the immediate sensory world. The warm rain on your bare arm, the elusive smell of lilacs, the bitter aspirin dissolving on your hung-over tongue. Your child in your womb, your woman in your arms, your feces in your bowels pushing downward.

In the second circle lie the systems of your mind, social constructs for creating

necessary order. The Town Line Road Swiss franc. Holy Mother Church, matriarchal lineage, Napoleonic Code, Monarchy, democracy, dictatorship, oligarchy, communism, socialism, Freemasons, Dow Chemical Company, Boy Scouts, Black Hand. Created order as opposed to, say, $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, which is merely discovered.

...

In the third circle lie the ambiguities, the questions without answers, the onely province of poets and mystics. You wake in the night with the warm wind blowing the curtains in the open window and turn over in the darkness. For a second you are aware of the blood in your veins, warm and full, and the strong beat of your heart against the sheet, and you think, Yes, but why? before sleep ebbs back in long waves, and the question is forgotten. Forgotten sometimes until the very end, when it seems too late to ask it after a while. Why here? Why me? Why now? And after now, what? What before? And how? Misty questions changing shape even as you look at them, like the bright swirls of color on your inner eyelids that come only from closing your eyes too hard. The questions children ask, some children, the children who pause in the baseball game at dusk, chewing on the soiled thumb of their fielder's mitts, to watch the stars come out and wonder. The third circle is full of shifting the "real" so treacherously underfoot that it becomes dangerous to move, and the best recourse is to stand still and wonder, letting the believed and the unknown dissolve into each other. The circle itself may not even be round.

...

Tyler estimates maybe four months, five at the outside. He'll put the money through Mexico, no problem there. But it would be best to be underway by October, if possible, because OPEC may be shifting its policy then, according to what Mahjoub has been feeding us.

Carruthers leaned back in his chair. It was a wing chair, one of a pair, hand-embroidered in the rich, discreet patterns of Jacobean crewel. With one finger he traced the 20.6 miles of shoreline on Poole's map. Rocky most of it, and wild. He'd been there once on vacation.

"Gosh, you ever have something completely inexplicable happen to you, something you couldn't account for any way at all? Something maybe unreal?"

Poole lit a cigarette, gaining time while he assessed the question. It could be an oblique reference to some mistake Carruthers had once made—as a prelude to one of Poole's? The press leak? But he had a ready pointed out—or was the question something else entirely, some subtle way of maneuvering, of throwing him off balance so Carruthers could probe for any hidden intentions, weaknesses, overlooked threats? Or was it an invitation, a first step toward an alliance against some coalition Poole hadn't yet seen forming but Carruthers had? But a man who needed an ally was a second choice to be one himself. Always try to ally yourself with the already unshakable.

Finally Poole said cautiously, "How do you mean 'inexplicable,' A? Did something happen up at the Cape?"

...

The boys play at the edge of the moor. Behind them stretches a plain of heather, before them a rainy pasture, tinged with green, a levee. Between heather and pasture is a crumbling stone wall, two feet high, that was ancient five centuries before.

"Bang!" shouts one of the boys, waving a plastic machine gun in the general direction of the other young boy. "Got ya!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Buddy, we did too! Lie down, you have to be dead!"

"Won't!"

"Will!"

"Won't!"

"Well, you got to! That's the rules!"

"Won't! You missed!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

I come around the end of the wall, wheeling a barrow full of iron ore. I am only as tall as the wall itself, and almost as old. Knotted gray beard, pointed brown cap, jerkin and breeches covered with earth from the mines. Only the bracet grows brightly that and my eyes, fiercely blue in the wrinkled sea of my ancient face. I stop pushing the barrow—the rocks clink together softly in protest—and stare at the boys, who look back at me without wonder.

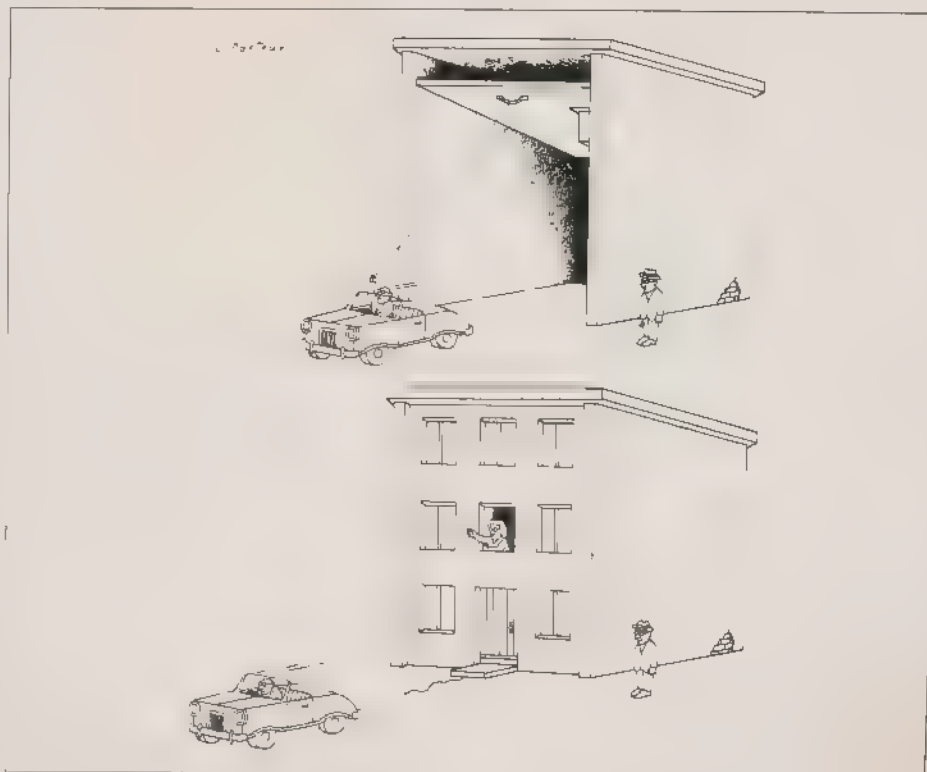
"Bang!" shouts the first boy. "You're dead!"

It is a forbidden indulgence to despair.

...

Carruthers ignored Poole's counter question. "Just 'inexplicable'—in any sense we're used to dealing with. Beyond the way things usually behave."

Poole had had time to make a decision.



They didn't come any tougher than Carruthers, any more ruthless anything Poole revealed about past mistaken perceptions, past misjudged deals, would be too risky. He put down his cigarette and lifted the coffee mug aware even through his tensions of its hefty, its expensive solidity.

"No," Poole said over the rim. "I can't really say that I have, Al. Jesus can find the explanation for pretty near everything that happens."

The two men stared at each other.

...

I swoop down over the near desert reaching the lowest point of my wide parabola over a ranch house, then rising again over the heads of dusty, unnoticing sheep. People run out of the open barn, their heads tipped back toward the night sky.

"Did you see it, Dad? Did you? What do you think it could have been?"

The man spits into the dust. "Lightning! Most likely, Heat lightning."

"Sure," the woman says, relieved. "Hotter in hell tonight."

No, it wasn't, Dad. It was too . . . too shaped. Like a silvery oval. It looked more like . . . like a ship."

The man snorts. "Too much comics, boy."

"Heat lightning," the woman says.

But you saw it had—

That's enough," the man says sharply. "We got work to do." He spits again, turns, and walks back to the barn. The other two follow, but I see the boy look back over his shoulder at the starry sky, his face lighted by doubt and longing and a suspicious astonishment, and I am satisfied. The Others will complain, no, never complain, but point out with gentle, relentless clarity that the power drain for this sort of thing is enormous, but I am satisfied. It is worth it.

...

"So we have two options, then," Carruthers said crisply, once more at business. "We can go ahead with the shoreline project and make damn sure Cranston gets the Washington boys to shove the right papers around, or we can let this one go to the environmentalists with lots of hue and cry, and rack up brownie points, cash, and voting positions for the big push on the Yukon deal."

Poole blinked. "But I didn't think it was ever a question of . . ."

"Those are the two options, Josh. And I'm the one who makes the final decision right, Josh?" His eyes checked the room, light gray ice.

Poole put down his coffee mug, a few

drops spilled over the edge, onto the teak table. "Of course, Al," he said.

So you better get on the phone, Josh, and plug your little press leak. The paper will need a retraction.

Yes. Right away."

"I hope it won't damage your network. Or anything."

Not at all, Al," Poole said genially, backing from the room. He backed into the door.

You didn't make any premature personal investments in the land without telling me, did you, Josh? Of course not."

Of course not.

Good. Get on it right away, then," Carruthers said.

...

Always the third circle slides down into the second. The mysteries of faith harden into the certainties of dogma; the revolution becomes the new government; the scientific theory habituates into the factual limits showing why something else can't be done. Wondrous, theoretical, possible, probable, factual, expected, mandatory.

I point this out, yet again, to the Others. They want something more dramatic and definite, I can tell. Something more like last time. Not this guerrilla warfare, hit and run, hiding under this world's own debunked mysteries to reclaim that sense of wonder of enigma of things not absolutely complacently unarguably certain, that it so desperately needs.

Look at what happened last time. I say again. Afterwards. Anything too organized will defeat its own purpose. That's the treacherous genius of their minds to codify.

Orle murmurs assent; I can tell he agrees with what I am doing.

But the time, Gabriel says. There isn't much time. Look at the physical state of the little world, even now. What if you can't do whatever it is you hope to do with all this furtive sneaking about . . . in time?

For answer I slip on the bracelet. It starts to glow, and I feel the power firm.

...

The middle-aged woman in black stands alone by the flowerless grave, staring down at the raw earth. A shopping bag with string handles rests on the ground next to her. It bulges with the disparate, shaped outlines of powdered milk, cat food, and day-old sweet rolls. The woman is not crying. Her face is set in the sagging lines of resigned defeat, curving troughs from nose to mouth like wobbly parentheses. She stands motionless, her wide knees a little apart, not even waiting. Just standing. The

tombstone says: John Alfred Reznick."

I climb from behind the tombstone to the top of it and gaze down at her. I, too, am middle-aged—or would be if I were totally corporeal, which I am not. It is very hard to hold the state between *here* and *not here*, a state intended only as transition, not prolonged exercise. My bracelet glows frantically, and I put my right arm behind my almost-back. It is doubtful that John Alfred would have worn a bracelet.

The woman looks at me with steady eyes. They are dead-leaf brown, and they don't widen or close or shift away. I watch her closely. Nothing.

Rosa," I say gently.

She continues to watch the tombstone with detached calm. It is not the calm of shock; she is not in shock, but I nearly am. She knows there is nothing after death, knows that beyond needing to doubt, knows it with every undeviating cell of her gray mind, and so is literally incapable of seeing what she knows does not exist. She looks through me evenly, straightforward, utterly unshaken in her unwondering certainty.

Gabriel is surely right. There is not much time left.

...

Carruthers turned his chair to face the window. The sky he was impressive even through fog, but he didn't see it. Absently his finger traced the line of coast on Poole's map, up and down and up again. Out the window he saw ocean, ocean, in sunset, and the impossible flash of a green-scaled tail above bare breasts ringed with failing bond hair and sea foam.

But how could it be impossible if he had seen it?

Carruthers knew he was not going mad; was not a man who stood in danger of madness. He might easily stand in danger of sudden coronary hypertension, kidnapping, stroke, emphysema, gang and murder, or lung cancer—but not madness. He trusted his judgment; it had proved too good too often not to trust. In his judgment, he had seen the impossible. Therefore, it was not impossible. He had seen it.

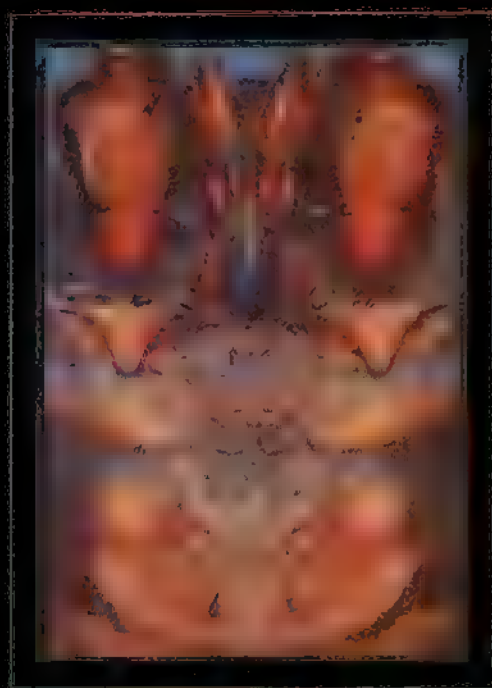
But what else might then be possible? Jesus Christ—just what else might be possible?

...

Orle murmurs again about the power drain, but not very seriously. He knows that I know he will manage somehow. And we both know that this, however bizarre the procedure, is a Major Project.

Salvation is expensive.

PICTORIAL
NUMBER FOUR



ERNST
FUCHS
ARTIST

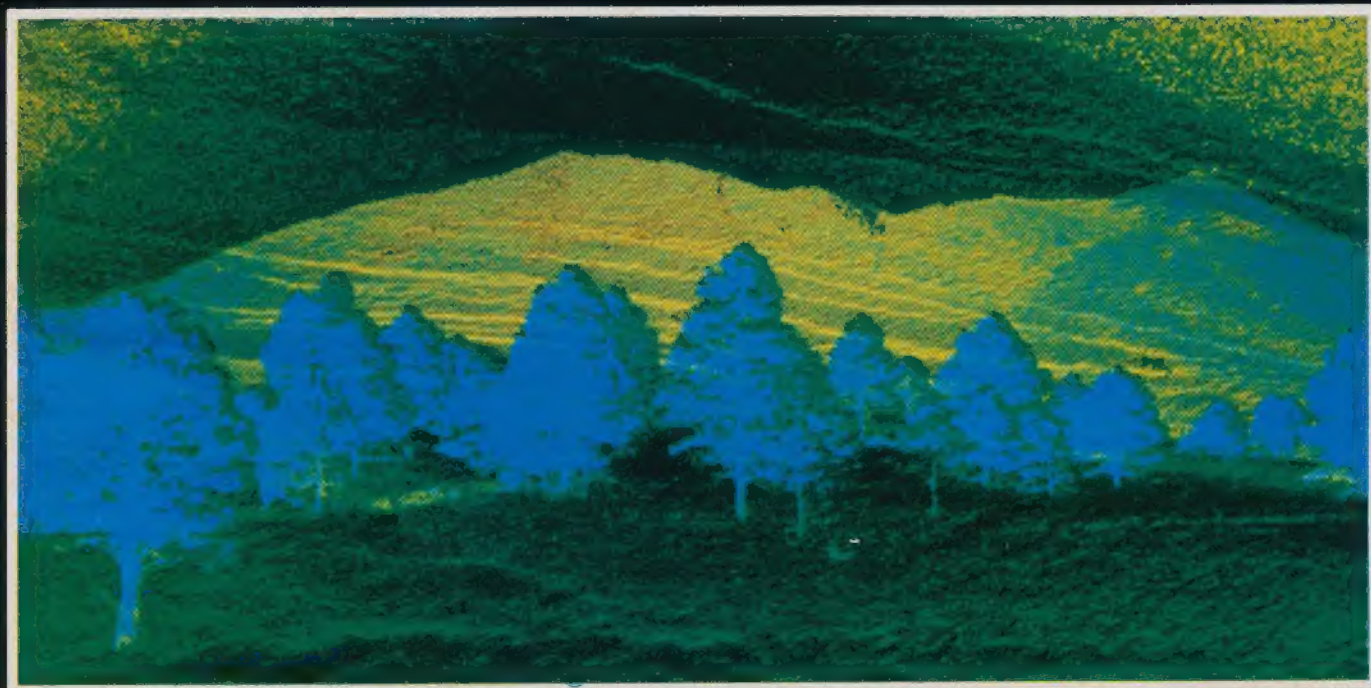






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